

Crazy or Impressive by WitchWithWifi

Series: Crazy or Impressive [1]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Character Study, Dad Steve, Fluff, Max is Steve's little sister now, Multi, Post S2, The opposite of Season 3, This definitely turned into the Max and Steve brotp no one asked for, background mileven, Steve Harrington character study

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler (background), Steve Harrington & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Steve Harrington & The Party, Steve Harrington & being the best

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-11-24

Updated: 2018-03-22

Packaged: 2022-04-21 15:27:42

Rating: General Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 19

Words: 29,212

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

"The thing is, Steve definitely did not mean to adopt six middle schoolers.

When your town is the literal hell mouth, however, things like surviving to adulthood, avoiding permanent physical trauma, and being a legally recognized parent get a little fuzzy."

Mostly fluff, featuring Steve Harrington backstory and Babysitter! Steve, who bonds with all the kids, and accidentally adopts Max as his sister.

Steve Harrington-centric with plenty of background Mileven.

This fic is undergoing edits/updates as of February 2022, but remains officially completed.

1. Pancakes and Family

Notes for the Chapter:

Gah! I swore to myself I wasn't gonna publish another fic right before finals. You'd think I would have learned my lesson from last year. But I missed writing, and this story was begging to be written, so...

This was supposed to be a one-shot. This chapter is just Steve, Max, and El, with mentions of all the other kids. If I keep this up though, we'll get to see everyone! Enjoy!

The thing is, Steve definitely did not mean to adopt six middle schoolers.

When your town is the literal hell mouth, however, things like surviving to adulthood, avoiding permanent physical trauma, and being a legally recognized parent get a little fuzzy.

"Steve," Nancy's voice crackled through the static of the phone. "Where's Mike?"

"Why're you asking me?" He grumbled, blinking the sleep out of his eyes. He cast a quick glance at the clock. The glowing red numbers informed him that it was indeed the ass crack of dawn. "Jesus, Nance, it's five am, go back to sleep."

"Mike's not home," She plowed through as though he hadn't spoken. "And if he's sneaking out to visit Eleven in the middle of the night, our mom's gonna kill him."

Suppressing a groan, Steve sat up, shoving the phone between his ear and shoulder as he fumbled around for socks. "Sneaking out to visit your girlfriend is a pretty normal part of being a teenager if I remember correctly." He quipped before he could stop himself. An awkward silence followed his admittedly poor choice of words. "I'll see if he's here and call you back. I'm pretty sure Max is the only one who crashed here last night."

Nancy laughed briefly, and Steve was relieved to hear it only sounded a little forced. “Your house is like the hub for wayward, lost children.

Have you started the official adoption paperwork yet?”

“*Goodbye*, Nancy.” Steve hung up and shuffled out of his room, squinting into the dark. *Shit*, the sun wasn’t even up.

He ducked his head into the guest room that unofficially had turned into Max’s bedroom. He could see her red hair in the darkness, but no one else. He closed the door and turned to the stairs, suddenly catching the scent of... bacon? His parents were still out of town, and there was no one but him and Max in the house.

Almost on instinct, he slipped back into his room to retrieve his baseball bat. Call him crazy, but many a monster (demodog, Dustin would grumble) had been taken out with this thing, and he refused to be caught off guard. He snuck quietly down the stairs, stepping over that one squeaky floorboard before peering into the kitchen.

Eleven was standing in his kitchen, focusing her attention on a skillet full of sizzling, popping bacon. As usual, her nose was bleeding.

“Jesus, kid,” Steve sighed, setting the bat against the doorframe, all tension draining from his body. Eleven hardly acknowledged him. “A little warning, next time? Maybe use the doorbell?”

She raised a questioning gaze to him. “Door...bell?”

Steve had been the last to meet the strange, powerful girl who’d escaped from Hawkins Lab, but after dealing with demogorgons and alternate dimensions, she hadn’t even struck him as out of the (new) ordinary. Though she still had a lot to learn about social graces, her telekinesis came in handy from time to time.

“Yeah, it’s a button near the door? It lets people inside know that there are people outside.” He explained, sitting down. He reached for a strip of bacon resting on a plate, but she slapped his hand away. “*Yeesh*, what gives?”

“We eat together.” She said plainly. According to Mike, she hadn’t

had a very large vocabulary to begin with, but living with Hopper and his monosyllabic ideals for conversations probably hadn't helped either.

"Max won't be up for another hour." Steve grumbled, rubbing his hand. The pre-teen almost looked apologetic, then turned to the skillet and jerked her head to the right. Three pancakes flipped themselves in quick succession. "Okay, now that's seriously cool."

Eleven grinned at him, pleased. When she wasn't battling monsters or *gah*- throwing supernatural temper tantrums, she really was quite adorable. "Jim taught me pancakes. I made them better."

Steve smirked. Stoic, kind of scary Jim Hopper, parent to the most volatile kid in the state. "Hang on." He peered at her with new curiosity. "Not that I don't appreciate the in-house breakfast service, but aren't you under-" He stopped himself before he could say *house arrest*. "Some protective rule?"

Eleven not so discreetly looked away. "I... was all alone?" Steve swore under his breath. Eleven looked intrigued. "Can that be my word for the day?"

"No!" He exclaimed quickly. The last thing he needed was to be in *more* trouble with her dad-slash-sheriff. "El, you know you're not supposed to be out on your own for like, nine more months."

"I was bored." She said edgily, turning off appliances with a twitch of her fingers. Steve handed her a tissue- an automatic reflex.

He couldn't help but feel bad for her. If she hadn't been locked away by those psychotic nut jobs- or at least hadn't been treated like nothing more than a lab rat, the kid might have actually led a normal life. Not for the first time, he wondered about the other ten kids, the ones who had come before number eleven.

"You need to be safe." He argued instead. "What would Hop or Mike do if-" Steve suddenly recalled the phone call. "Wait, Mike didn't come over last night, did he?" Eleven shook her head no, concern coloring her delicate features. "Nancy called a few minutes ago, wanted to know where Mike was. She thought he might be visiting

you.”

She shook her head again, looking more worried. “No, not last night. He said he had homework. Do you think it’s a demogorgon?”

Steve shook his head. “I don’t know what to think-”, then paused. “Wait, what do you mean, ‘*not last night*’? Does he actually sneak in? Oh my god, Nancy’s gonna flip-“

“I will look for him.”

“Oh, with your mind powers?”

Eleven stared at him, going from cute to deadly in half a second. “Not if you don’t shut up.”

“Don’t be rude.”

El ignored Steve’s quibbling and closed her eyes. The soft radio music turned to static. Once he was sure that El was well and truly inside her own mind, he stole a strip of bacon and watched as her eyes flickered around rapidly beneath her eyelids. It was simultaneously gross and incredibly cool.

Just when he was considering stealing another piece (he was bored, and who knew how long this would take?) El’s eyes flew open. “He is at the store.” She reported, and Steve breathed a sigh of relief, snaking his hand back across the table. “He was getting flowers.” She added, sounding confused. “But he has flowers outside of his house. I don’t understand.”

Now, Steve laughed out loud. Mike wasn’t in mortal danger, he was buying flowers for his girlfriend. “You’ll figure it out later.”

Before El could question him further, a shuffling noise drew their attention to the stairs, and Steve saw a fuzzy-headed Max stumble into the kitchen, rubbing her eyes. “Who made breakfast?” She asked, her voice scratchy. El waved, offering Max a tentative smile. She was still trying the whole “being nice to new friends” thing, but Max seemed to take her quirks in stride. God knew they all had some. “Sick.” She surveyed the counter. “No Eggos?” She asked, raising a suspicious eyebrow.

El frowned, but the deadly expression from before was gone. “Jim said I needed to...” She paused, looking for the right term. “...’Branch out’. Less Eggos.” She looked well and truly put out by the sentiment.

Steve stifled a laugh and looked over to see Max doing the same. El’s addiction to Eggos was strange and somewhat inexplicable, but had become something of an inside joke with the party. “It looks delicious, El. Sit down, I’ll grab the syrup.”

“Do you want to hear about all of the boring crap we learned in school yesterday?” Max offered, casually taking the reins of a conversation she knew El would never start on her own. The other girl nodded eagerly, and as the sun rose and washed the kitchen tiles in a golden light, Steve listened to Max chat in an unusually animated matter, explaining to El the intricacies of pre-algebra and how unfair Ms. Lebell was, and how Dustin had gotten in trouble for swearing in class. “Steve totally reamed him out later.”

El looked up at Steve, who nodded solemnly. “I babysat and made him do homework.” She giggled.

After breakfast, they tag-teamed dishes and cleanup, and Max pounded back upstairs to get dressed while Steve called Nancy to let her know Mike was alive. Then he went out to get the newspaper with El tagging along. She tugged on his sleeve as they made their way back inside.

“Steve?”

“Yeah?”

“Mike and Nancy have parents.”

Steve looked at her, narrowing his eyes in confusion. “Yeah...”

“Lucas and Dustin do too.”

He’d never been one for word games or beating around the bush. “What are you asking, kid?”

El tilted her head to look up at him. “Where are your parents?”

Whoop, there it is. “Not here.” He said shortly, knowing that wouldn’t be enough of an answer for her.

“Are they... gone?”

“No.” It came out blunt, and harsher than he intended. She paused, looking cowed. Instant guilt washed over him, and Steve ran a hand through his hair. He hadn’t taken the time to tame it yet, so it was standing out every which way, like he’d stuck his finger in an electrical socket. “Sorry, sorry. It’s just... they go on trips a lot, so I’m alone. They send money every month, and I take care of myself.”

At first, it had been cool, having the house to himself for a night, or a weekend. When Steve was thirteen, he’d order pizza and stay up watching bad TV and blasting the radio until the sun was peeking in through the curtains.

When he was fifteen, he’d throw ragers and get trashed, sometimes only cleaning up hours before his dad’s station wagon rolled up. He shot up in popularity, and relished in the newfound fame, his only hope being that it would last.

When he was sixteen, they’d be gone a week, maybe two. He’d learned how to grocery shop and use coupons, get cheap beer, and most importantly, not tell anyone.

When he was seventeen, he gave up on hosting, and went to other peoples’ parties instead. It got depressing, cleaning up when he knew no one was coming home. Filling an empty house with empty people left him more depressed than ever before.

When he was eighteen, he adopted six weirdos and their families into his life. Suddenly, it didn’t matter that he hadn’t seen his mom in two months, or that his dad was still in the trial run of branching out his stores in different states. There were kids filtering in and out of the living room or the kitchen at all hours of the day. Joyce would call to see if he wanted to come over for a casserole while the kids played D&D. He, Nancy and Jonathan would sometimes stay up late, drinking all that cheap beer he’d bought and debate whether or not they should write a sci-fi book based on their adventures.

These weirdos, this strange, cobbled-together family, filled him up with warmth, though he'd deny it up and down to anyone who asked.

Except El, to whom he told all of this until she was smiling and he was, too. "Tell anyone this, and your ass is grass." He warned, but still smiled and mussed her curls. She batted his hand away and tried to fix the tangle, lips curling upwards into an elfin grin. It was finally growing past what he'd dubbed its "little orphan Annie" stage, though he still claimed it had been a fitting nickname.

He bundled El and Max into the car, first dropping El off at her cabin under strict orders to actually stay this time. "I'll tell Hop about Mike's little field trips if you pull this shit again." He said. El looked unperturbed, waving before disappearing in the decrepit-looking home.

Next stop was to drop Max at the middle school. "See ya later, Zoomer." He quipped with a wink. Max rolled her eyes.

"God, you're so weird." She groaned, which was as close to a "Have a good day" as he was going to get from her.

"No, I'm Steve!" He called after her. She slammed the door shut and ran over to the bike racks, where Dustin, Lucas, Will, and Mike had just rolled up. Dustin waved enthusiastically at Steve, who returned the wave before pulling out of the parking lot, not even trying to hide his smile.

2. Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas

Notes for the Chapter:

This is a slightly shorter chapter, but y'all, I'm blown away by the response to this fic! Thank you guys so much- I promise, there is more to come (about 10,000 words more)! Enjoy!

"What're you doing for Christmas?" Dustin asked as he chucked his bag into the back of the car, settling into the passenger seat. He shook the snow from his hair. Christmas music had been playing all day on the radio, and Steve was starting to get sick of it. Too many singers crooning about family and being home for the holidays. He turned down the volume and eased onto the road.

"Why do you ask?" Steve responded, deftly avoiding an answer. Truthfully, he had no idea. Last year, he'd been dating Nancy, which meant Christmas Eve dinner with the whole Wheeler family, and driving over the next morning to give her her present and spending the day together. This year, his dad had called to let him know that the Pawnee branch was having some trouble, and they wouldn't be back in time for Christmas. Even Max's parents were back for the holiday week, which meant the house would be completely empty. As usual.

"Hopper and Eleven are having- well, we're not calling it a *party* because El's still under house arrest, but, like, a get-together. To celebrate the holidays and the fact that we escaped death. Twice." Dustin explained, digging through his backpack and fishing out a wrinkled, clearly homemade flyer, displaying it for him. "You're invited."

"Huh." Steve paused, pretending to seriously consider it. "I guess hanging out with you losers wouldn't suck too bad. I'll try to swing by." Dustin grinned, pleased, and settled against the seat. "Do I have to bring anything? Presents or food or some shit?" Sometimes Steve second-guessed swearing around the kids, but then remembered they were more foul-mouthed than he was. He'd learned quite a few creative swears from Dustin and Max in the past few months.

“Well, I mean you can always bring food. I think there might be a Yankee Swap thing? But you could just throw in a pack of gummy bears.” He paused. “I think Mike’s probably gonna pawn off his ceramics project off on someone.”

“Is it any good?”

Dustin stared at him. “I don’t think it even qualifies as a *thing* . It’s horrible.”

They both snickered as the car raced past snowbanks.

“Hop! Open up!” Steve was already frozen, no thanks to the half-mile trek he took to get to the cabin. Middle-of-fucking-nowhere indeed. Music was playing inside, muffled slightly by the door, and the warm lamplight shone through the warped windows. Max was trying to stomp feeling back into her feet, arms tightly crossed as she tried to stay warm. She’d managed to sneak out to join them for the night.

“Use the special knock!” Someone, probably El, shouted through the door.

“Jesus Christ,” Steve hissed, and rapped on the door twice, once, then three times. The door swung open, and Steve bundled both Max and himself inside quickly, relishing in the instant warmth that washed over them. Hopper closed the door behind the pair, while El offered to take their snowy coats, laying them out by the fireplace, where a collection of outerwear was already piled high.

In the middle of the living room, a Dungeons and Dragons game was set up, with the boys and Eleven gathered around. El sat back down and casually leaned against Mike’s shoulder, listening to Will and Dustin argue over whether or not they should split up the party or not, while Mike carefully avoided eye contact with Hopper. Lucas was running the game as DM, but dropped his book almost immediately when he caught sight of Max, scrambling up a little too quickly as he hurried over to greet her.

Steve slid between them before Lucas could reach her, though. He clapped a friendly hand on the kid’s shoulder, leaning in to say in a

low voice, so Max wouldn't hear, "Keep it PG. Hopper's got eagle eyes." And passed him to go sit on the sofa.

He heard Lucas stiffly greet Max, and formally invite her to join the game. He smirked.

"Oh, hey, Steve's here!" Nancy dropped onto the couch next to him, wearing a snug green sweater with little jingle bells sewn into it. "Took you long enough. Dustin was making us wait to start on the snacks until you got here."

Dustin glanced up to grin at Steve, who fist-bumped him. "Solidarity, my brother. Thanks." He took a sugar cookie proffered to him by Nancy, biting in with relish.

Joyce was nursing a beer, laughing at something Hopper had said. Nancy popped up to eagerly dole out cookies and drinks, while Jonathan took pictures of the festivities. He turned the camera towards Steve, who struck a dramatic pose with half the cookie in his mouth. They both laughed, Jonathan taking a seat in the spot Nancy had recently vacated.

"I'm glad you could make it." Jonathan said, sounding hesitant. Their relationship had been strained for a long time, but after cheating death together twice, and running into each other when hanging out with the kids, they had managed to form a tentative friendship.

"I am too," He said, pausing and wondering if he should continue, eventually admitting, "It's pretty depressing sitting in my house alone on Christmas Eve."

"Oh, are your parents not home?" Joyce appeared out of nowhere, scaring Steve out of his skin. Jonathan suppressed a smirk and snapped a photo of a startled Steve with his hand on his chest. Steve subtly flipped him off, so that Joyce couldn't see.

He turned to face her. "My parents are opening another store across the state, so it's just been me for a while." He shrugged, not wanting her to worry. "It's fine, really."

Joyce gaped at him. "It is *not* fine. You're coming over here for

Christmas.” Hopper glanced at her, but she smacked him in the chest without breaking eye contact with Steve.

Steve’s mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. “I, uh, you really don’t need to-“

“You should come,” Hopper grunted. “The Byers’ are coming over, you should too.”

“You don’t have to be alone.” Jonathan said gently, and Steve knew he was talking about more than just the holiday.

Quietly, he agreed. “I’d really appreciate that, Ms. Byers. Chief.”

Joyce beamed, Hop nodded, and Jonathan clapped him on the back, before gathering up everyone for the gift swap. Sure enough, Mike was able to pawn off his ceramic thing (was it a giraffe? Pyramid? Vase?) on El, who looked at it like it was made of pure gold. Steve gave Dustin some comics he knew the kid had been wanting for some time. Max gifted Lucas aviators and a new bandana, while El gave her a small stuffed animal, holding a wonky plank of wood. “Skateboard.” She explained. Max grinned.

Gifts went around, everyone laughing and gasping in surprise at their presents. It was warm, and messy, and friendly, and Steve didn’t even realize he hadn’t been given anything until Dustin loudly and pointedly cleared his throat, looking at Eleven.

“Oh! Right.” She jerked her head, and a badly wrapped present floated over, landing in Steve’s lap. He blinked in surprise.

“What is it?”

Dustin snorted. “You have to open it, dumbass.”

“Yeah, dumbass.” El echoed, trying out the new word. Hop shot her a glare and she shrank into Mike’s side, mouthing “Sorry”.

He peeled back the (many) layers of wrapping paper, eventually uncovering... “A Supercom?”

“Yeah, so you can keep in touch with us and stuff,” Dustin explained,

flipping it on. “We all pitched in for it. We’ll show you what channels we’re on, that way none of us have to call your phone.” He paused, looking at Steve’s face. “It’s cool, right?”

Steve wasn’t blinking back tears as he ruffled Dustin’s hair. Really, he wasn’t. “It’s the coolest, little dude. Thank you guys.” He addressed the group, who all smiled, pleased. He clutched the giant brick of a thing close, and felt like the hole inside himself was finally being stitched back together.

Notes for the Chapter:

I will not apologize for excessive mushiness (It gets less mushy though, no worries). Next update should be up Tuesday or Wednesday!

3. The Others

Notes for the Chapter:

A short chapter, which I will make up for by posting another short chapter tomorrow! But I wanted some lazy Steve hanging out with people who were older than 13.

“You know what I’ve been wondering for, like, a year?” Steve asked, a new book propped up on his chest (a Christmas gift from Nancy). He was lying across the couch in Hopper’s house while Jonathan was sprawled on the floor, fiddling with his camera. In the kitchen, Nancy was making popcorn for their carefully planned out movie marathon (“*Ghostbusters is not a Christmas movie, Byers.*”), while Eleven was in her room, drawing with Will and a new pack of crayons. Hop and Joyce had gone out for a walk over an hour ago. Steve was trying not to picture what exactly they were doing on their “walk”.

“You’ve been wondering why I’m better looking than you without all that hair product.” Jonathan deadpanned without looking up. Jonathan had the kind of humor that Steve hadn’t expected. It caught him by the ankle at the most unexpected times, causing him to laugh out loud or roll his eyes, trying to suppress a grin.

Steve resisted the urge to stick his tongue out at him. Hanging out with middle schoolers had not done him well. “I think I liked you better when you didn’t make jokes, Byers.” Lie. He let the book fall on his chest, the pages creasing. “Nah, I was wondering about the kid’s name.” He dropped his voice, so the girl in question wouldn’t hear. “Eleven. So, she’s number eleven, right?”

“Right,” Nancy replied, sitting down across Steve’s legs, leaning down to offer popcorn to Jonathan. “Your point?”

“Well then, there were others before her. Where are they? What happened to them?”

Nancy paused, a wrinkle appearing between her eyebrows. “Well, after everything that happened to El, I assumed they... you know...”

She gave him a meaningful, sorrowful look.

Jonathan's voice was hushed. "Yeah, I don't think they'd just let those kids go, man. El was treated like a lab rat, imagine what they'd do to all the others. I don't think all of 'em coulda escaped. She got lucky."

Steve sighed. He knew they'd say that, but he had hoped, maybe, someone would have had a more positive outlook. "You're probably right. Still, those poor kids..."

A heavy silence fell over them. Eventually, Nancy straightened up. "Alright, well, let's get on with this! Jonathan, what movie's up first?"

Jonathan peered at their list. "Santa Claus is Coming to Town."

So they watched and laughed and ate, and tried to put the ten other children they'd never met out of their minds. Tried. But didn't quite succeed.

Notes for the Chapter:

Welcome to "me trying not to write tooth-rotting fluff." (I may or may not have a little bit of angst coming up in a few chapters...). See you tomorrow!

4. The X Factor

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry about the delay in posting! But as promised, I am back and with a short chapter for y'all. Enjoy!

Steve had a headache. A skull-splitting, ass-kicking, day-ruining headache that made it nearly impossible for him not to explode at Nancy as she probed him again about his future plans. "I don't know, Nance, I can't see myself going anywhere important- not like you, or Jon." Jonathan grimaced at the nickname. "Yeah, no, that sounded wrong to me too." He amended.

"Just because you're not applying to the big schools doesn't mean you can't get into *any* schools." Nancy insisted, sitting down next to him. "You're smarter than you give yourself credit for, and I hate watching you put yourself down like this." She leaned over to pick up the pamphlets on the coffee table. "Just... try."

They were at his house this afternoon. The emptiness had been eating at him all day. His parents were once again gone, and there was a surprising lack of middle schoolers raiding his kitchen or watching his TV this week. Even Max had decided to brave Billy when her mom came home for the week.

He hadn't realized how much he'd come to rely on Max's loud banging and cursing and constant badgering of him until she went home, and the house was just... hollow. So he called up Nancy, and suggested she bring Jonathan over (he was trying for friendship, okay?), and settled in to write his college essay. He'd been staring at the same blank sheet of paper when they showed up.

'Maybe...' Jonathan spoke up from the end of the couch, where he'd been reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Steve leaned past Nancy to look at him. "Sorry, never mind. It's probably stupid." He shook his head, bangs swinging in a protective curtain over his eyes.

Nancy looked about ready to defend him, but Steve put a hand on her arm. Jonathan was still hesitant whenever they hung out, and Steve

got it, he really did. But he was starting to realize they had more in common than he'd first thought. Jonathan was smart, and patient, and he protected his brother with a ferocity Steve both admired and envied. "Whatever it is, it's not stupid." Steve said, and he meant it.

The tension in Jonathan's shoulders lessened ever so slightly as he met Steve's eyes again. "Maybe... you should join the police. Be a deputy or something."

Steve's first reaction was to snort, say no, and continue ruminating on his future as a lifeless corporate droid. But he hesitated, mulling the idea over in his brain.

Nancy voiced his thoughts before he could. "You know, that's not a half bad idea. You've taken out hell monsters with nothing but a spiked baseball bat- you could totally be a deputy."

"Huh." He slowly nodded, liking the idea the more he thought of it. "I could..." A sudden realization struck him, and he grinned widely at the two of them. His friends. "My dad would hate it."

Nancy rolled her eyes, Jonathan snickered, and Steve was sold.

With Nancy and Jonathan's help, he finished his various essays and applied to the colleges that would make his parents proud, but he kept the deputy idea safely tucked away in his mind, wanting it more and more each day. Having an in with the Chief didn't hurt, either.

He asked Dustin about it one afternoon while they were studying at the local library- him for forensics class, Dustin for algebra.

His little buddy looked up at him with wide-eyed excitement. "Woah, seriously? Dude, that would be so cool!"

His voice echoed off the library's quiet walls, and the librarian sent them a severe glare. "Hey, keep it down, bud. We can't get kicked out before you've isolated the x-factor." The kid just grinned toothily at him and Steve smiled back, equally genuine, before returning his attention to his forensics book.

Notes for the Chapter:

Look, we all agree Steve's gonna be a deputy. I'm just going with the flow.

(I'm also toying with the idea for a new longfic/series when I haven't even finished this one yet??
SOMEONE STOP ME)

5. Never Again

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, first things first: A character in this chapter experiences a minor panic attack. I did my best to write about it, but I understand everyone experiences them a little differently, and if I got something incorrect, or make you uncomfortable, PLEASE let me know in the comments, and I will be happy to make the change! This story should be a fun read, with angst dropped in here and there. I am merely writing based on my own experiences and attacks.

Enjoy!

“Steve?” Max’s voice drifted out from her bedroom as he emerged from the bathroom, toweling off his wet hair. He threw the towel over his shoulder, hoping it wouldn’t soak through his sweater.

“Yo.” He pushed open Max’s door. The lights were on, and music was playing, but instead of sitting at her desk, or working on her skateboard (*no skateboarding in the house*) she was on the floor, leaning against her bed with her head in her hands. She was shaking, and taking short, gasping breaths.

He dropped the towel and flew to her, hands hovering, not sure if he should touch her. “Max?” He asked gently. She just let out a loud sob. “Okay, shit, I think I know what’s happening,” He said, trying to sound calm. Nancy had had a panic attack about a month after the first time they dealt with the Upside Down, and after, Steve had done research to make sure he could help her properly next time.

He turned off the music, and came to sit by her. “Okay, Max, I’m gonna touch your arm, okay?” She gave him no sign she’d heard him, but she didn’t try to fight him as he pulled her hands from her face. Her face was covered by a light sheen of sweat, and she was pulling in rapid, hiccuping breaths. Her face was red. “Okay, I need you to breathe with me. Hey, Max?” His voice was level, calming. She met his eyes. “Ready? In.. two.. three... and out... two ... three. Good job, kiddo. You’re doing so good. Let’s go again, you ready?”

After a few minutes, Max has stopped shaking, and was breathing normally again. She collapsed against Steve, drained. Startled, he hesitantly put an arm around her shoulders, brushing away the hair stuck to her face. “You alright, kid?” She shook her head, hiding her face in his jacket. “That’s okay. It’s okay, Max. You’re safe here. It’s okay.” He rubbed her back, not knowing what else to do.

An indeterminate amount of time went by before Max spoke again. Could have been a few minutes, or almost an hour. Steve just sat with her, breathing with her. “I was wondering about Billy.” She murmured into his shoulder, so quietly he wasn’t sure he heard her at first.

“Why?” The question was out of his mouth before he could stop it.

“I’ve been gone too long.” Steve scrunched his face together, counting backwards. He’d picked Max up on the 30th of January, and today was... *shit* it was the 20th of February.

Concern hit him like a freight train. “That asshole hasn’t tried anything, has he? Because my bat hasn’t seen action in a while, and I’m kinda missing the feeling.” He didn’t mention how he sometimes accidentally on purpose body slammed the asshole during basketball practice.

Max let out a scratchy laugh, and Steve melted with relief. “No, he still knows I have... backup. But I just wondered what if... and then I started thinking about those *things* and if they showed up again, and I was at home alone, and...” She trailed off helplessly, not meeting his eyes. “It was stupid, I can’t believe I lost my mind about it.” She peeled herself off him, swiping angrily at her eyes.

“Hey,” He urged her to sit again. “It’s okay. You had a panic attack. I’m pretty sure we’ve all had one now and again. No shame- we kinda went through a ton of shit. Welcome to the club, kid.” He offered half a smirk, holding out his hand. Max glared at him, but shook his hand. Her lips quirked.

“Thanks, Steve.” She murmured, surprising him by surging forward and wrapping him up in a hug. “You’re a good brother.”

Steve huffed out a surprised laugh before hugging her back, extra tight. “No problem, kid. Any time. You never have to be alone, okay?” Not like him, with the empty house and empty life.

Except it wasn't empty, was it? Max's room, slowly becoming her own, with books she left just for here, clothes hanging in the closet, and a poster that had snuck up on the wall. Dustin, El, Mike, Lucas, Will tramping in and out at all hours. Joyce with her casseroles, Nancy and Jonathan with their endless support, Hop helping him with deputy prep. Not empty at all.

“Never again.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Poor Max :(I'm really glad she and Steve look out for each other. Max should officially move in. Too bad Steve can't legally adopt her...

Up next: Pure, tooth-rotting fluff. Literally a side story that sprang out of my head because I was craving chili.

6. Chili & Cornbread

Notes for the Chapter:

Disclaimer: I literally just wanted a chapter that felt WARM. Like, you read it and you feel like it's giving you a hug. We deserve it, and god knows they deserve it. Hopefully this makes up for the angst in the last chapter. Also fills my "Steve learned how to cook to feed himself and now his big-ass chosen family" headcanon. Enjoy!

Alternate Title: The Steve and Max Cooking Show.

"You... *you* know how to cook?"

Jonathan was staring at Steve with a look of disbelief. Steve snorted. "You're not the only kitchen wizard, Byers. I can make a *mean* quiche. And don't get me started on my pasta abilities."

"Oh, this I *have* to see."

So, that's how the entire PartyPlus ended up at Steve's house. The fridge was, for once, fully-stocked in anticipation for the crowd.

Hopper was doling out cranberry juice to everyone while kids filtered in and out of the kitchen, living room, and backyard. Mike convinced Eleven to try it, and the moment the flavor hit her tongue, her eyes widened to almost comical circles, and chugged her glass so quickly she had hiccups for almost half an hour after. She almost broke Mike's nose when she hiccuped violently right as he leaned down to try and kiss her. Dustin had tears in his eyes from laughing so hard. Will actually fell off the couch, clutching his stomach in a fit of giggles.

Steve and Max had taken on the responsibility of cooking, deciding on chili and cornbread- embarrassingly simple, but hearty enough to fill the crowd. Lucas hung around the kitchen, watching Max with wide-eyed wonder as she confidently browned meat, not flinching away from the heat, while Steve diced tomatoes and onions. They were a pretty good team in the kitchen.

As usual, Joyce appeared in the doorway every five minutes. “Are you sure you kids don’t need anything?” She asked, almost imploringly, though her lack of kitchen prowess was well-known at this point.

“Will!” The boy in question appeared at Steve’s call. “Give your mother this,” Steve tossed him a can of beer, which he caught with fumbling hands. “And tell her to relax and let the chefs handle this.”

The kids’ laughter was audible from the living room. Joyce gave him a stern look, but allowed her son to lead her into the living room, where Hopper had turned on the game. El was sitting on the floor, her hair marginally tamed by a headband loaned to her by Nancy, looking immensely comfortable in a purple sweater and jeans. Mike was sitting a little more stiffly next to her, painfully aware of the looks Hopper sent their way every so often. Still, anyone could see their fingers were intertwined, and the way their heads tilted toward each other, giggling about everything and nothing.

The scent of cooking chili filled the entire house, making it feel more warm and home-y than usual. Nancy offered to be official taste tester, making increasingly absurd suggestions at random intervals.

“I mean, it’s pretty spicy, you might want something sweet to balance it out.”

“Such as?” Steve asked, wooden spoon in one hand, dish towel in the other.

“Oreos.”

“Out of my kitchen, wench.” He pointed with the spoon, which just made Nancy laugh harder.

A minute later, he heard a faint crunching noise, and whirled around to see Max, with a half-eaten Oreo in her hand. She froze, the cookie halfway to her mouth, then hid her hand behind her back as though Steve totally hadn’t caught her in the act.

Steve held his hand out. Max pouted, but handed over the cookie. Steve turned to throw it out, but quick as lightning, Nancy snatched

it out of his hand and finished it. He glared at her, though there was no heat behind it. "You're setting a bad example for this one." He reprimanded, shielding Max's eyes. She batted his hands away.

"Wasting good food was the bad example here." She replied cheekily.

Jonathan wandered in. "Smells good." He leaned down to steal a kiss from Nancy. "Oreos?" He looked up at the chefs. "Do you have any?"

Steve threw up his hands dramatically. "Ruin your appetites, don't eat my chili, that's fine."

Jonathan snorted.

Lucas ducked out of the room, but returned a moment later, trying- and failing- to suppress a mischievous grin. Max sent him a questioning look, and he beckoned for her to come closer while Steve's back was turned, and whispered something in her ear. She grinned.

"Steeeeeve," She whined. "The mixer isn't working." A bold-faced lie, but it caused him to come over to where she was making cornbread, while behind him the package of Oreos floated through the air, out of the kitchen, and into the living room.

Once everything was cooked, simmering, or baking, the rest of the party retired to the living room to catch the last quarter of the football game. Max and Lucas were teaching El how to play cards while Mike and Dustin debated whether or not they should include new characters in their new campaign. Words like "out of continuity" and "thesselhydra" "It makes more/less sense than real life," were being thrown around, and Steve tuned them out in favor of watching the Hoosiers score another touchdown, eliciting cheers from the adults- except Jonathan, who still looked perplexed by the game. Will managed to keep Mike and Dustin from coming to blows by producing some sort of character book, smoothly changing the direction of their already incredibly nerdy conversation.

The scene was so normal, Steve could almost think they were just a group of average people, hanging out over football and dinner, their biggest concerns being school or bills or whatever shit they used to

care about before everything went to hell. But there would be moments where someone's eyes would glaze over, or others who would laugh too hard, or forget to react at all. Those moments, though fewer and farther between these days, served as reminders of what they all went through. It *was* real. They *had* almost died. Their survival came with the ugly cost of the constant reminders, the physical and mental scars that could heal, but never vanish permanently. The burn mark on Will's waist. Eleven's tattoo. The fine scars on Steve's forehead, and another on his jaw. Nancy and Jonathan's twin, jagged lines across their palms. Max's panic attacks, Mike's nightmares, Lucas's trigger at the sound of a mustang backfiring on the street.

Christmas lights weren't hung at the Byers' this year. They might never be again. But they were here and they were *alive*, bedraggled and frayed as they were. So they stuck together. They convinced each other to be strong each and every day, and to push forward. Towards what, no one was sure.

But for tonight, it was towards some chili and cornbread, because Steve had spent four hours on the meal, and he would be damned if anyone turned it down.

(Jonathan admitted it was the best chili he'd ever tasted, and Max and Steve glowed with pride for the rest of the night.)

Notes for the Chapter:

Tbh I almost cried because this makes me miss our family friend's chili. She makes some damn good chili.

Up next: Eleven talks- Mike talking to Steve, El talking to Nancy, and everyone getting very embarrassed.

7. Dating and Pamphlets

Notes for the Chapter:

How has it almost been two weeks since the last update? My gratuitous apologies, friends! Finals happened, then a 16 hour drive home, and then the obvious 48 hour catch-up with my best friend. But we're back and better than ever! Here we have: Mileven being awkward and asking Steve and Nancy about dating.

Another week, another kid coming to him with their problems. He'd finally learned to stop asking questions, and just accept the various middle schoolers piling into his car. He was wrapped around their stupid fingers, and they all knew it. Today, however, was just Mike. That was a rarity.

"Hey, Wheeler. No buddies today?"

He shook his head, sliding into the passenger seat. "Everyone's biking to the arcade."

"What, and you're too lazy to ride along?" Steve teased, though he was already turning on the car.

Flushing, Mike ducked his head. "No, it's not that." He hesitated. "I actually wanted to ask your advice."

"My sage advice? I'm honored, truly. On what? I'm a font of knowledge, mini Wheeler."

"Dating."

Steve nearly swerved off the road. "Oh, Jesus." He breathed.

"I know, but I didn't know who to ask!"

"Maybe someone who's in a relationship, for starters?"

"You were in a relationship."

“Yeah, dude, with your sister. Months ago.”

Both made faces at that. “Okay, that *disgusting* fact aside... I need your help.” Mike turned his pleading puppy dog eyes on him. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose. “Okay, okay. I’ll help you, but you so owe me, dipshit. Got it?”

Mike nodded eagerly. “Yeah, totally, deal.”

The car rolled on, and Steve made a right on Maple Road. “So, last I heard, you were dancing with her at the Snow Ball, right? And then you got her flowers- smooth move, by the way.”

“Yeah, but she didn’t get what they meant until I explained it to her.” Mike griped, throwing his head against the headrest. “Every date, every time I do something, it’s brand-new to her. Everything’s a first. I...” He cut himself off, glancing at Steve. “Nevermind, it’s stupid.”

“It’s probably not stupid.”

“It really is.”

“Bro, I can’t reluctantly help you if you don’t tell me everything.”

Mike’s face was red, and his expression was downright depressed as they pulled up to the ice cream parlor. If he was gonna have this conversation, they needed ice cream. (And, in Steve’s case, a beer) “I have this feeling that the only reason she’s with me is because I’m the first person she ever met who was, like, her age. And nice. And she’s only with me because she doesn’t have the words to tell me that she doesn’t lo- like me like that.”

The kid covered his face with his hand, still red. Steve felt embarrassed *for* him.

“Damn, kid, you’ve got it bad.”

Mike groaned. “Tell me about it.”

Steve leaned back in his seat, turning off the car. “So, you’re in love

with this girl- don't cut me off, I'm helping you- and you think she doesn't love you, and ended up with you by default?" Mike nodded, eyes downcast. "Well, that's complete and utter bullshit." Mike whipped his head up, surprised. "Kid, you radioed her every day for, like, a year. And she heard every single time. She literally crawled out of hell to find *you*." Steve poked Mike in the chest. He was still red, but now he was blushing. "I'd say it's pretty certain she likes you back, if not loves you. You've got nothing to worry about, little dude."

"You think?" Damn his eyes were so hopeful, so young, like he hadn't battled the hounds of hell, twice.

"Yeah, kid. Have you seen the way she looks at you? It's gross. You two are gonna be fine." And in that moment, it was absolutely true.

—

Two days later, Max came home, face redder than her hair. "Yo, little red!" Steve called from the couch, flipping through the mail. Max came in, her face frozen in a strange look, like she'd seen a ghost. "What's up?" He instantly straightened up, wondering if she was having another panic attack.

She sat down tensely next to him. "El just asked me what sex was." She turned to face Steve, whose eyes were now wide as saucers. "Yeah. That was my reaction."

"Um." He ran an uncomfortable hand through his hair. "What- what did you tell her? Wait, no I don't want to know. Please, god, don't tell me. I don't want to know what you know. Don't get pregnant." Steve buried his face in his hands. "I'm so not ready for this conversation."

Max grimaced. "I mean... I told her what I knew... God, it was *such* an uncomfortable conversation and I think I made her even more confused. I confused myself." She scrubbed her hands over her red cheeks.

They sat in terse silence. "So! Dinner!" Steve clapped his hands together, attempting to dissipate the tension in the room.

"I may never have an appetite again." Max muttered, but she stood and followed him to the kitchen anyway, watching as he pulled out vegetables and a cutting board and knives.

"Oh, we don't..." Steve wrinkled his nose. "We don't have to have the talk, right? Because- and I mean no offense- I would literally rather have to gouge my eyes out with a spoon." Max glared daggers at him. Steve held his hands up, one still gripping a knife. "Just looking out for you, little dudette."

Max rolled her eyes, but there was now affection in her gaze. "Steve, believe me, you are one of the last people I would go to for this." He relaxed, turning back to the carrot he was slicing. She paused, smirking. "Besides, Nancy was there. She said she would take the time to go over everything later."

Steve nearly cut off his finger.

"Nancy," Max whined, dropping on to the older girl's bed. "Steve is so weird."

Nancy snorted softly, continuing to run a brush through El's curls. She was beginning to introduce the girl to barrettes and headbands as a way to accentuate and control her wily curls. El was fascinated. "Believe me, I know. What'd he do this time?"

"I told him about what El asked me, and the next day, I found this in my room." She shoved the brightly colored pamphlet into Nancy's lap.

She read the title and burst out laughing. "Oh my god, where the hell did he find this?" She asked, ditching the brush in favor flipping through the pages.

El twisted on the floor to face her. "What is it?"

Quick as lightning, Max dove forward, pulling her friend back. "Oh no, not for your virgin eyes."

"I want to read it!"

Nancy pursed her lips. "I mean, this could be useful for her." Then she made a face. "Wait, she's dating my brother. I really don't want to think about that. Awkward."

Suddenly, the paper was flying out of Nancy's hands, and landed in El's extended palm. Her eyebrows drew together as she read the title. She wiped the blood from her nose and opened it up. Her eyes positively popped as they landed on the first visual. Max and Nancy exchanged wide eyed glances.

"I think you have to think about it now." Max muttered. Nancy grimaced.

"Okay," she blew out a breath, and slid off her bed to sit cross-legged on the ground in front of El, who was still reading. "El." The girl looked up. "It's time for us to have the talk. God knows Hopper won't give it to you."

El, in her adorable innocence, scrunched up her nose in confusion. "Hopper told me not to ask about it."

Nancy looked up at her ceiling, muttering something like *God, give me strength*. Max gave her a sympathetic smile. "Okay, El. When a boy and a girl love each other very much, and are at least forty years old..."

Notes for the Chapter:

DON'T JUDGE ME. EL IS INNOCENT AND KNOWS NOTHING.

Let's be real, Nancy would give El the best advice. (Next to Joyce. But Joyce is busy making sure Will doesn't get, like, possessed again.)

Up next: College? Drama? Appearances by [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]?? See you in two days for that wild ride!

8. Accept...

Notes for the Chapter:

I know, it's been four days but y'all know the holidays are wild. :) Enjoy!

“Steve!” Nancy ran into the house, large envelopes clutched in her hand. “Your acceptance letters are here!” Byers followed her in at a slower, less manic pace, his usual sideways smile on his face. Ever since he’d started dating Nancy, the guy smiled a lot more. Steve couldn’t begrudge him. Nancy had that effect.

“You mean my rejections?” He made a face at her from the couch. He hadn’t even moved when she burst in. “Look, we know I’m not going to college with you guys. So, why the fanfare?”

Nancy dropped down onto the couch next to him, blowing out an exasperated breath, while Jonathan made himself comfortable on the ground. “You never know, man. You might end up really wanting to go.”

“Says the one going to NYU.”

Jonathan rolled his eyes. “Only if my scholarships come through.”

“They will!” Nancy and Steve insisted at the same time. This was a common topic between the three of them.

“You deserve it, man,” Steve clapped his friend on the shoulder. Their friendship was strange, and certainly unexpected, but Steve wouldn’t trade it for the world. Jonathan was a true friend in every sense of the word, and Steve was only sorry he hadn’t pulled his own head out of his ass sooner.

Ducking his head, Jonathan gestured towards the envelopes. “Just open your damn letters.”

Steve grinned, and grabbed them out of Nancy’s lap. “Alright, let’s see who was stupid enough to accept me.”

“Steve!”

As it turned out, the community college, Wesleyan, Indiana University, Michigan State, and even University of Maine were stupid enough (that last one had been for shits and giggles, but it was nice to know the moose riders liked him.). Notre Dame had waitlisted him, and, of course, he was politely rejected from NYU. “Huh.”

Nancy squeezed his shoulders. “Steve, these are great schools! Your parents—” She cut herself off quickly, but Steve didn’t feel the sting he usually did when his parents came up. They’d been gone for so long he hardly considered them parents at this point. “Everyone’s gonna be so excited for you.”

“You think you’re gonna go?” Jonathan asked. He pointed at a few letters. “Look, these guys are even offering you scholarships.”

“But I was gonna apply to the police station...”

“Which is something you can do after you get a degree,” Nancy reminded him, urging. “You’re only young once.”

Steve snorted at that. He stopped being young a long time ago.

Still, he stared at the papers contemplatively. He could take the scholarships, move out of his parent’s shell of a house, and get the hell out of Hawkins, middle of nowhere Indiana.

Instead, he found himself asking, “What about the kids?”

Nancy furrowed her brow. “What about them?”

He made a face, trying to pretend he hadn’t been worrying about this all year. “Well, what are the little shits gonna do without their favorite babysitter?” He asked teasingly, pretending to preen, but Nancy and Jonathan saw right through him, as usual.

“We’ll be here for another year,” Nancy assured him. “They’ll be fine.”

Jonathan, the guy who’d rather observe than participate, read his friend’s expression easily, and understood his real question. “You’re

wondering what Max will do.”

“Oh,” Nancy sat back, a worried expression crossing her face. “That... that is a problem.” She looked at Steve. “Is Billy-“

“No.” He said instantly. “Not since that night. But still, if I leave, and then you guys go next year...”

They both nodded in pensive silence. Billy may have been in Steve’s year, but they all knew he wasn’t going anywhere except odd jobs, and then hopefully jail in the future. Until then...

“I’ll ask Max.”

“Ask Max what?” The redhead in question appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

“Hey there, zoomer.” Jonathan greeted her cheekily. Max glared at him.

“You’re all the worst.” She declared crossing the room. “Seriously, guys, ever heard of lights?” Dusk had fallen while the trio had been talking, and the sudden onslaught of brightness nearly blinded them as Max flicked the switch.

The letters were still on the coffee table, and Max, ever observant, snatched one up before they could stop her. Her face went blank as she read. “So... You’re going to college?” She asked, her voice carefully steady.

The answer was quick and honest. “I don’t know yet.”

Nancy and Jonathan shifted uncomfortably, but didn’t leave. Steve kind of loved them for that.

The redhead sat down on the floor, next to Jonathan, facing Steve. “These are good schools.” She remarked, pulling the letters into her lap, going through them one by one.

“I know.”

“What’s holding you back?” She tilted her head to look at him,

curious.

He held her gaze. "A lot of stuff, kid."

"What if you take a gap year?" Jonathan suggested.

Steve peered at him suspiciously. "What do you mean, Byers?"

Jonathan shrugged, nonplussed. "Exactly that. Stick around, work in Hawkins for a year, see if you prefer that, then if you still want, go to college at the same time as me and Nance."

Nancy was nodding. "That makes sense. You could probably even get the same scholarships here," She held up one letter, "And here if you took a gap year. My dad did the same thing. You could even take a couple of classes from the community college, so you'd be ahead when you actually get to the university."

Steve didn't know that. None of them really talked about their dads, nor did they have the benefit of any older siblings with whom to compare experiences.

There was only one opinion that really mattered, though, and it wasn't even his. "Max?"

Her face was still impassive, but he could see the relief, and maybe even hope in her eyes. "I dunno, I guess it would be cool to still have a personal driver next year." She smiled at him then, the little one reserved for when she was actually happy. "You're an okay big brother to have around."

"Well, there we go!" Steve clapped his hands, gathering up the papers. "Looks like you losers are stuck with me for another year." He winked at Nancy, who giggled. "So, I think Dustin and Lucas are coming over. El and Mike are off at the movies making goo goo eyes at each other of something." Nancy gagged. "You two want to stay for dinner?" The pair chorused in the affirmative, and Steve turned to Max, jerking his head towards the kitchen. "C'mon, dweeb, let's go find something resembling food." As if they hadn't just gone grocery shopping, or spent Sunday working on the weekly meal plan. It was fun, and soothing, to hang around the kitchen, surrounded by

delicious smells, or to methodically chop vegetables, no one to impress but the two of them, and whichever middle schooler(s) passing through that day.

Max followed him readily, pulling out one of their newer cookbooks, flipping it open to the chicken teriyaki recipe. “This work?”

“I’m already pulling out the rice.” Steve handed her the bag. “Think you can handle boiling water?”

Max rolled her eyes. “Jesus, Steve, that was one time.”

“One time I’ll never let you live down.” He smirked, and turned to pull the chicken out of the fridge.

As he was reaching for the cutting board, he felt two arms wrap around his waist. “Thanks for staying.” Max mumbled into his sweater.

He almost quipped back with something like “Can’t leave you guys to have all the fun without me,” but even he could tell this was an important moment, so he just turned to hug her back, and say quietly, “Thanks for believing in me.”

Lucas and Dustin showed up five minutes later, and Steve pretended not to notice the way Max shyly kissed Lucas by the door after Dustin wandered into the living room, following the sounds of Footloose playing on TV.

An hour later, everyone was gathered around the table, laughing, and talking and kicking each other accidentally on purpose. Steve was treating the group to a rousing rendition of Old Time Rock and Roll when the front door banged open, and two people he hadn’t seen in months appeared in the dining room, their eyes wide with shock.

“Mom? Dad?”

Notes for the Chapter:

Cliffhanger? Sorry, couldn't help it!

The moose-rider thing was all in good fun. I'm from Maine! My roommates think that my parents are

lobsters and I rode a moose to school.
See you guys within the next four days!

9. ... Or Deny?

Notes for the Chapter:

And we're back! Shorter chapter this time, but provides resolution to the last chapter and casts a little more light on Steve's backstory. Enjoy!

"Steve?" His mom's voice was uncharacteristically high. "What's... ah, what's going on?" His father took in the scene with stony silence.

The room had gone silent. "Dinner party?" Steve responded, though it came out as a question. "I felt like cooking."

Another pause. "You can cook?" His dad asked, curling his lip slightly. Steve shrugged one shoulder, not looking at Max.

"I learned."

His mom let out an uncomfortable laugh. "Well, this isn't quite the party we expected to find." Her eyes lingered a bit too long on Jonathan, before jumping over to Lucas. Steve ground his teeth.

Jonathan and Nancy exchanged glances, and suddenly there was a cacophony of scraping chairs, and "We're so sorry to have intruded"'s and "Thanks for dinner, Steve, it was amazing,"'s and "We'll see you tomorrow"'s. Max followed suit, but cast a helpless glance at Steve. Her stuff was here, and she had no way to get home. Jonathan placed a gently hand on her shoulder as he gathered plates and gave her a discreet nod. She was safe with him.

"We'll just clean these up and be on the way." He told Mrs. Harrington politely, clapped Steve on the shoulder, and disappeared into the kitchen. Lucas and Dustin had the leftovers in the fridge in a flash and were gone within a minute, Jonathan, Nancy, and Max hot on their heels.

Steve's father watched in stony silence as his friends left the house, taking all that warmth and happiness with them. "You hanging out with that Byers creep?" He asked coldly, once the door banged

closed.

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose, pushing past his family, heading for the stairs. He had to close Max's door before his parents saw what was inside. Not that they noticed much in the first place. Still, it was no longer the plain, impersonal, nondescript guest room. "Yeah. And he's not a creep."

"He stole your girlfriend right from under your nose."

"He did not *steal*-" Steve cut himself off, counting to 5 in his head. *Don't lose it.* "Nancy is her own person. She's allowed to choose who she wants to date."

His father scoffed in derision and made for the fridge. "Didn't drink all my beer this time, Steve? You really have turned over a new leaf." Strangely, he didn't sound all that pleased. He cast a glance at his mother, who merely shrugged.

"Isn't the younger Byers... well, isn't he a *queer*?" His mother whispered the last word, as though it were poison on her tongue.

Steve's blood boiled. "*Will* has been through hell and back, and he is a survivor. That's what really matters here." He scoffed, leaning against the stair railing. "What happened to the other store? Aren't you still branching out?"

"We are." His father replied. "But we came back to check on our favorite son." He ruffled Steve's hair in what could have almost been construed as friendly, except Steve knew better.

"I'm your only son."

"Even more reason."

Mrs. Harrington squeezed his hand. "We miss you, baby. It's just opening the new store has been so hard on your father."

"We have to head out again in a week- the Newton branch seems to be throwing money right down the toilet." Mr. Harrington scoffed from his position in front of the TV. Steve couldn't believe it. Max couldn't come home for a week? Because Mr. Harrington had

suddenly remembered his son?

His mother pulled him into a hug, smoothing down his tousled hair. “Do you want me to stay, sweetie?” She asked quietly, patting his cheek. “This one might be a longer trip.”

Steve had to force himself to wait the appropriate time to pretend to think about the offer. “No, thanks, mom. I know how much you love Newton.” He pulled her into another hug. “All I’ve got going on is school and basketball- you’re not missing much.”

She smiled at him sweetly. “You’re doing so well, Steve.” A characteristic frown flitted across her face as she touched his messy hair. “Though you do need a haircut. You don’t want to look like one of those ruffians with those horrible mullets, do you? No, of course not. I’ll set up an appointment with the barber.” And with that, ducked into the kitchen. Steve relaxed and hurried up the stairs. He had just shoved Max’s duffel bag under the bed when he heard his mom call for him from the kitchen.

He tromped back down. “Yeah?”

His mom had his acceptance letters in her hands, eyes shining with proud tears. “Oh my gosh, you didn’t tell us you applied to these schools!” She waved the Notre Dame letter at him. “Bill! Bill! Steve got into college!”

Mr. Harrington grunted from the living room. “He’d better get some damn scholarships.”

“Oh, look at these!” His mother kissed him on the cheek, and pulled back to look at him. However, her eyes were distant, as if she weren’t really looking at *him*, but rather the college student she wanted him to be. The entrepreneur, the scientist, the big bucks guy. She rushed into the living room to show his future to his father.

And as usual, he planned to disappoint them in a major way.

Notes for the Chapter:

Yeesh, the Harrington parents suck, am I right?

In other news, I... finally see a light at the end of this

story? I'm finishing it up right now, and I expect maybe 5, 6 more chapters at most. As always, thanks for reading, and I'll see y'all in a few days!

10. Graduation

Notes for the Chapter:

This is, like, a three-month time jump or something. I have some drabbles up my sleeve that cover that period, but I wanted to move the story along. So, without further ado... graduation! Enjoy!

“Oh, just one more!” Joyce insisted, holding up the camera again. Jonathan groaned.

“Mom, you already have, like, five hundred!”

“This is Steve’s graduation, Jonathan. Now stop talking and smile.”

Nancy and Jonathan pressed in close to Steve again and gave the camera goofy smiles. Steve’s cheeks were getting sore, but he’d never deny Joyce. She’d been half the reason he hadn’t starved in those first few difficult weeks after everything. (Open flames nearly sent him into a catatonic state)

“Oh, you look so grown up!” She crooned, handing Jonathan the camera without half a glance, reaching up (*and damn, she was short*) to pat Steve’s cheek. He flushed. His own parents were out of town, but sent him a wad of cash and “Congratulations.” Written on a piece of hotel paper. Things had been... tense, since they found out he was taking a gap year. Which just made him feel more secure in his choice. Jonathan must have told Joyce about the tension in the Harrington house, because she’d been even more open and welcoming and encouraging than ever before. Steve pretended he felt smothered by all the attention, but really, he loved it. Joyce Byers, literal ray of sunshine.

“Give the kid some breathing room, Joyce.” Hopper grumbled, placing a hand on her arm. He nodded towards Steve. “You look good, kid. Scholarly.”

“I look stupid.” He argued, bunching up the robe with one hand. “Who the hell thought robes were *the* graduation style?”

Nancy opened her mouth to answer, but Steve quirked an eyebrow at her, letting her know it was rhetorical. She frowned at him.

“You look like one of those church people.” Max commented from the couch. Steve whirled around to glare at her. She was tucked into Lucas’s side, wrinkling her lavender sundress- something she’d fought tooth and nail against with Nancy. They came to an agreement when Nancy said she could bring her skateboard to the ceremony.

El was outside with Mike (when *weren’t* they together?), playing with the dog. Once she got over her initial apprehension of animals, she discovered that she loved dogs. After that, she was over at the Byers’ a lot more- though that also may have been due to Hopper’s frequent visits to “check in” on Joyce. Of course, if El was there, Mike was too. And if Mike was over, the rest of the party would inevitably turn up sooner or later. Steve had been spending more afternoons in the Byers’ place than his own, quibbling with Jonathan over music while Nancy just watched the exchange with a bemused expression on her face. Those lazy afternoons with his best friends had quickly become some of his favorites. They were different than the alcohol-fueled debauchery he, Tommy H, and Carol would get into. They were more real, somehow. It kept him grounded, and kept him going, through finals and beyond.

Steve flipped off Max before turning back to Nancy, who was holding in a laugh.

“This’ll be you in one short year, Nance.” He reminded her, wrapping a friendly arm around her shoulders.

“And I’ll look about a million times better than you.” She fired back with a grin, blue eyes twinkling.

Jonathan appeared in front of them, snapping a photo before either of them realized. “Jeez, Byers, give a guy a warning.” Steve complained. “You didn’t even get my good side.”

“You don’t have a good side.”

“Oh, screw you.”

They shared a laugh. Two years ago, he couldn't have imagined trading barbs back and forth between Jonathan- much less spending the day of graduation with him. But here they were, and he was thrilled to spend the day with his best friends.

"Yo, Steve!" Dustin slid in from the backyard. "Catch!" His hands flew up before his mind processed what was flying towards him. He looked at the small can in his palms. "For your hair. That hat is *not* doing you any favors."

Steve tucked the can of Farrah Fawcett spray in his pocket before anyone could see the label. "Thanks, man."

The kid flashed him a toothy grin. "Any time, my lord."

"Nerd."

"Okay, okay, lets get going." Hopper began physically corralling everyone towards the front yard, pushing the kids forward like he was herding sheep. "Don't want Steve to be late to his own graduation."

"It would be ... *characteristic* of him." El commented, glancing up at Hopper to see if she'd used her word of the day correctly.

He gave her an approving nod, but replied with, "I'm not letting him stumble in late like some hooligan."

"Hoo-li-gan," The girl murmured under her breath, trying the word out. She burrowed into her guardian's side as the group piled into various cars. El, Mike, and Hopper were taking the truck while Joyce, Jonathan, Will and Nancy piled into Joyce's car, leaving Steve with Dustin and Max as passengers.

Max won shotgun dibs this time, and was still preening about it halfway through the drive. Dustin's protests, "You live with him! You get front seat all the time!" fell on deaf ears.

"Hey, are we gonna talk about me, or am I gonna have to kick you two losers out of the car right now?" Steve asked, mostly kidding. Mostly.

The kids instantly demurred, “Sorry, Steve.”

“So, the station for a year, huh?” Dustin leaned forward, elbows on his knees, tucking his fists under his chin. “You gonna arrest Max next time you catch her sneaking out?”

Steve whipped his head to face Max, who in turn was glaring daggers at Dustin. “You’ve been sneaking out?”

“No!”

“Liar.”

“Only to sleep over with El! God, Dustin, you’re such a tattletale.”

“Guys, guys! Stop hitting each other! Don’t tattletale and don’t sneak out! Dustin, put your seatbelt back on before I crash and send you through the windshield. Jesus.”

Max pouted and crossed her arms. Dustin grinned. Steve sighed. Being a parent was hard work.

Graduation itself was easy. They called his name, he rolled up onto the stage, sunglasses and all, and sent a playful grin toward the section whooping the loudest, knowing Jonathan was there with his camera. He could practically feel half of his group of friends rolling their eyes, which just made him smile wider.

After he got through the crowd of classmates, clapping a few of his friends and teammates on the back, he broke free and managed to find the party members all waiting for him on the fringes of the crowd.

Max barreled forward to hug him, followed close by Dustin and Joyce.

“You did it, big bro!”

“You looked so cool!”

“We’re so proud of you.”

Soon, pretty much everyone was joining in on the group hug, except Jonathan, who was taking pictures, and Hopper, who didn’t believe in public displays of affection. The chief would never even kiss Joyce with the kids around, despite their relationship being common knowledge. El claimed he was a big softy under all that bravado, though. And a terrible dancer.

They ended up back at Joyce’s place for their little graduation party. Cake was cut and a bonfire was lit, and everyone sat around on the grass, roasting weenies or s’mores, drinking in what was to be the first of many long summer nights.

Hopper tossed the elder three teens a beer, and smacked Lucas upside the head when he asked for some.

Will was showing El how to make a s’more, with Mike beside them, ready with graham crackers and chocolate. Max was more interested in lighting her marshmallows on fire, which was fine because Lucas liked his s’mores on the burnt side. Dustin was trying to show Jonathan the way to make the perfect s’more, even though Byers managed to mess it up every single time.

“So, Benjamin Braddock, how does it feel?” Nancy asked, clinking her bottle with Steve’s as she sat down next to him.

“Really, Nance?”

“Come on, I’ve been sitting on that reference for weeks!”

Steve laughed and reached up to run a hand through his hair. “It feels great. I can’t believe I actually graduated, y’know?”

“Hey,” Nancy gave him a serious look. “That’s your stupid dad talking. I knew you were smart. You did really well this year.”

Steve shrugged, the dad comment sliding right off. She was right, of course. “Well, I got by with a little help from my friends.” He watched the kids through the flames, Max laughing as Mike got marshmallow on his nose, while El managed not to get a single finger dirty while eating her s’more. Dustin was shamelessly going after the

entire Hershey's bar. Hopper nudged him with one foot, Joyce curled into his side, content.

"They're good kids." Nancy agreed. "Little shits, but good kids."

"Did you ever have this?" Steve asked. He gestured around them with his bottle. "The whole family-and-friends, actually happy backyard bonfire thing?" His mother had never cared for campfires, claiming she didn't want soot smears on her nice white carpets.

She pursed her lips, thinking. "Well... we used to do campfires when Mike and I were little. But not like this. It was like we were going through the motions, doing what we were supposed to do, not because we wanted to. This is different." She peered at Steve in the dim light. "It's better."

He took a swig, nodding. "It's sweet."

Then Dustin crashed into his side, yelling something about how Lucas had destroyed his *perfect* marshmallow, while Max was chasing El around with a flaming marshmallow, which El then made float, and turned it around to chase *her*, both girls shrieking with laughter the entire time.

"Don't set anything else on fire," Hop called lazily from across the yard, still comfortably seated with Joyce on a lawn chair. El blinked innocently at him while the flaming ball of sugar hovered beside her.

"Lucas, apologize to Dustin." Steve instructed, peeling the two tussling boys apart.

"I was totally framed!"

"Dustin, apologize to Lucas."

"It was the perfect marshmallow!"

Nancy shoved the bag of marshmallows into Mike's hands. "Fix your friends."

Will watched with wide eyes, eating a s'more with what suspiciously looked like the perfect marshmallow Dustin had been roasting

minutes ago.

Kids, Steve thought, shaking his head. If he'd been an outsider looking in, he'd never guess that these pre-teens had cores of steel, and had saved the world with nothing but slingshots, gasoline, and wit on their side. Well, and one scarily powerful telekinetic girl. Details.

Jonathan procured a blanket from the bag they'd hauled out, and held it out as an offering to Nancy, who smiled as she snuggled up to him. The boys made eye contact, and offered each other awkward, rueful smiles. Steve missed Nancy, missed her like crazy, but couldn't deny that she and Jonathan made each other better. She was softer, while he was more open, less hesitant. And they were his best friends. So he offered the couple a nod, and then got up to see if he could wheedle Dustin into making him a perfect s'more.

Notes for the Chapter:

Look, Steve loves his found family and it makes me emo.

ALSO, I know nothing about the police force or how it works in small towns, but I'm just gonna say since Steve helped save the world, Hop pulled a few strings and is letting him intern/shadow at the station for a year.

Up next: Shopping?

11. Chemistry Shit

Notes for the Chapter:

Happy New Year, all! I'm back with a chapter that... doesn't have Max in it? I know. But Steve hangs out with the others! Proof: (aggressively shoves chapter in your face)

ALSO: This chapter takes place BEFORE graduation, but AO3 doesn't let me re-order the chapters. Enjoy!

"I'm telling you, mini Wheeler, half of this chemistry shit is made up." Steve claimed as they pulled up to the Byers'. Joyce wasn't home, but Will was sick, which meant El, who still hadn't been introduced to mainstream school, got to spend the day taking care of her friend (and playing with his dog).

"Nancy would probably disagree." Mike argued, sliding out of the car. Steve followed suit, and tossed the kid his backpack before reaching for his own.

"Nancy is probably responsible for all of this bull." He countered as they walked in. "Will! Your walking, talking, singing, and dancing medical brigade has arrived!" He pulled out two cans of chicken noodle soup and plopped them down on the counter.

El rushed out from the hall, a finger pressed to her lips. "He's sleeping!" She met Mike's eyes and both of their smiles got disgustingly soft and dopey. "Hi, Mike."

"Hey, El." Steve turned away, fake gagging when Mike stepped forward to hug his girlfriend, resting his chin on the top of her head. They were a very tactile couple, Mike and El. Always holding hands, or leaning on each other, or even gently resting fingers on shoulders or each others' backs. It was cute, but slightly concerning to Steve. Their relationship was far from normal, but he was afraid that at one point, it might crash and burn like so many others. He hoped it wouldn't.

For now, though, Mike was pulling El into the living room, excitedly

pulling out his science textbook to show her what Mr. Clarke had taught that day. The girl was fascinated by science, everything from outer space and black holes to the atoms that made up the earth. Even, *gag*, chemistry. And Mike was more than happy to teach her everything she knew. When he was talking, she drank in his words like they were from the Holy Spirit itself. It was gross. And adorable.

Steve busied himself with his own homework, and was still scratching his head over chemical formulas when Will shuffled into the kitchen, bleary-eyed and pale.

“Hey, buddy, you should get back to bed.” Steve grabbed the kid by the shoulders and wheeled him around, ready to march him right back down the hall.

“Water,” Rasped Will, and with surprising deftness for someone with a terrible cold, twisted out of the babysitter’s grip, and secured himself a glass of water.

Steve wasn’t even surprised. “You hungry?” He asked, pressing the back of his hand to Will’s forehead. Clammy, and cool, but nowhere near Mind Flayer temperatures.

He shook his head, taking another tiny sip from his cup. Steve sighed. “El?” He raised his voice to be heard by the girl in the other room.

“Yes?” She poked her head into the kitchen, curls swinging.

“Has Will eaten today?”

She frowned at the younger boy. “Yes. Only toast. He kept saying he wouldn’t eat anything else.”

Will stuck his tongue out at her. “Traitor.”

El mimicked his face before disappearing into the living room with a “Don’t blame me when you starve to death.”

Steve let out a low whistle. “I’m starting to regret vocabulary lessons. She got sassy.”

Will smiled wanly. “Mike says she’s always been sassy- she’s just

expressing it through words these days.” He turned to go back to his room, but quick as lightning, Steve snagged him by the collar.

“Slow down there, ninja, I haven’t forgotten about feeding you. Sit down there, and I’ll fix you up some soup.”

“Yours or canned?”

Steve offered an apologetic smile. “Canned, sorry. But I got the good stuff, Campbell’s!”

Will made a face. “Yours is the best.”

“Don’t inflate his ego!” Mike called from the living room.

Steve started the stove. “I think I know where El is getting her sass lessons from. Regardless, my sous chef is on an arcade date, and I know better than to interrupt that. Catch.”

The younger boy looked up just in time to catch the box of colored pencils flying at him. “What’s this for?”

“Doodling. You like that, right? You can use my notebook over there. As long as you don’t get your nasty germs all over it.”

Will shot him a smile. It was bright in contrast to his otherwise pale face. “No promises.”

The canned soup was ready in five minutes, and Steve served all three kids, correctly assuming that if Will saw Mike and El wolfing down their share, he’d be more inclined to finish the soup and crackers.

The kids spent the rest of the afternoon coloring, while Steve cleaned up the kitchen for Joyce, actively avoiding his chem homework (it may as well have been in Greek for all he understood),

Jonathan got back first, ruffling his brother’s carefully styled bowl cut as he passed. “You’re looking better. How do you feel?”

“Better. Steve made us all soup.”

Jonathan looked up at his friend hopefully. “Yours?”

Steve held up the can with a rueful smile. “Campbell’s.”

The other boy swore, earning giggles from the younger lot. “Yours is the cure-all, man. You could make millions.” He disappeared down the hall to change, just as the clock struck six.

“Alright, little dudes, it’s time to roll out.” Steve called, hunting around for his and Mike’s coats. All three kids whined in disappointment. “If we want to see the light of the next day, we need to have Miss El back before dark.” El beamed at the nickname. Little Orphan Annie didn’t stick once her hair finally grew out.

Mike grumbled a bit more, but eventually, Steve got the three of them out the door, bidding Jonathan and Will goodbye over his shoulder. The drive back to the cabin was short, but colored in with Mike and El’s animated chatter in the backseat. Steve didn’t understand how they could have so much to talk about. After a few months, he and Nancy had fallen into the comfortable silence part of their relationship, but Mike and El seemed to be showing no desire to stop. Like, ever.

The telekinetic girl was home by the time the final rays of sunlight were fading from the sky. Stars winked into existence as Steve dropped Mike off, waving at Nancy through the window.

Once home, he collapsed onto the couch, flicking on the TV to the news, watching it listlessly for a few minutes. “Good god, I’m an old man.” He grumbled. He caught sight of his backpack in the hall and swore. “I’m an old man with chemistry homework. Perfect.”

He rifled through the mess of papers and books until he finally found the right notebook, and flipped it over to the right page. And burst out laughing.

Will Byers had carefully colored in each of his formulas, color coding each element and connection. It made his messy attempt look like an artistic masterpiece. “Fucking Byers....” He muttered in astonishment. That kid was going places. Well, places other than the Upside Down. Hopefully.

Notes for the Chapter:

Have you guys read *The Move In*? If you're missing Max, it's a slightly more descriptive fic about how she came to live with Steve. Fluffy, obviously.

Any comments or suggestions on who or what situations you want to see next are welcome! (There may or may not be dress shopping in the future). Let me know in the comments!

12. Oh, Mother (Part 1)

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow, it feels like forever since I last updated! Classes have begun, and I'm already drowning, but here's a little chapter requested by a few of you! Enjoy!

Despite the constant jokes that floated around the group, and her near constant presence in the house, Max did, sometimes, have to go home. Every time Steve dropped her off in front of that house, it felt like he was letting one of his own kidneys out of the car. She didn't look too happy, either. The best they could do is hope that Billy still had his tail between his legs, and that her mother, at least, would be home.

The days she slung her duffel bag into his backseat with a casual "Greetings, loser." made him feel like a weight had been lifted from his chest, and he could properly breathe again. While Steve was by no means Max's keeper- she'd shown that she could undoubtedly hold her own- he always felt better when she was out of that house. They got along, and got on each other's last nerve, but, most importantly, they made the other feel less alone. He was constantly wondering if this was what it felt like to have a sibling.

When he pulled up to Max's house one rainy Monday, he saw an unfamiliar red car parked next to Billy's immaculate Mustang. His hand hovered above the gear shift, unsure of what he should do. Park, or reverse and back out?

He parked.

In under a minute, he saw a familiar figure stomp out of the house, but his relief was shortlived when he saw another redhead, taller and older, follow Max out. Max's mysterious, perpetually absent mother. Except she wasn't absent. She looked pissed, her eyebrows scrunching her delicate features together. As they got closer, Steve could hear their argument.

"He's my friend, mom, he babysits Will and Dustin."

"I don't like the idea of an older man galavanting around town with my daughter. I've never even met him, Maxine."

Steve sucked in a breath, aware of what would follow *that* statement. Max wrenched the passenger door open and tossed her bag in the back with so much force, it knocked over all of his old basketball gear. She turned in the seat to face her mom, pointing a forceful finger at a wide-eyed Steve. "*This* is the guy I'm 'galavanting' around with. He's been looking out for me all year, not that you would know."

Her mother opened her mouth to respond, but Max pushed forward, gaining steam. "He took care of me when you and Neil would take off for god knows where and leave me with \$15 and Billy. He's more family to me than Billy will *ever* be. He's more family to me than you've been this entire year." She angrily brushed her fire-colored hair out of her red face. "And now he's going to take me to my friend's house, because that's what good people do for each other." Steve was, in fact, going to take her to a friend's house. His house, where a D&D game was already well underway.

Max's mother's mouth was opening and closing, like she was a fish out of water. Steve figured this was as good a time as any to lean across the passenger seat and smile. "Hi, Mrs. Mayfield. I'm Steve, Max's unofficial babysitter." He reached out a hand for her to shake.

Her eyes finally focused on him and narrowed. "You're a high school senior. What's your business with my daughter?"

Steve resisted the urge to roll his eyes and dropped his hand. He couldn't very well say *we defeated an inter dimensional monster and then she realized she was unsafe at home so we're roommates now*. He opted for the next best option. "I'm actually a deputy." Provisional officer, but he wasn't going to focus on semantics. "And my business is she needed a lift? She hangs out with the kids I babysit."

"And where *are* those kids?"

"Dustin Henderson and Will Byers? Across town. We actually should be getting going." He made a big show of checking his watch. "Yikes, Joyce'll be leaving in ten minutes. You do *not* want to be late with

Joyce Byers.” A bold faced lie, but a believable one. Max crossed her arms and leveled a glare at her mother, challenging her to fight.

Mrs. Mayfield’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Be back for dinner. 6 pm.”

Max leaned back, as if her mother had deeply offended her. “Dinner? You sure you’ll still be around? Because I sure wouldn’t want to miss out on the chance to play *happy fucking family*.” She reached out and slammed the car door shut. “Drive.”

“But-“

“Drive, Steve!”

Steve pulled the tightest U-turn in his life, leaving the Mayfield house in his rearview mirror, with Mrs. Mayfield standing stock still, dumbfounded.

They drove in silence for a few minutes. Max’s face was still red with anger, and Steve had a white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel.

Eventually, it became too much for him. “So...” He started carefully. “That was your mom.”

“Yep.” She said shortly, popping the “p”. The single word was like a bullet in the otherwise quiet car.

He paused. “She was worried about you.” He couldn’t exactly *blame* Mrs. Mayfield for her initial reaction. To her, he *was* a strange man driving her daughter around Hawkins. She didn’t have all the facts. Because she hadn’t been around. Which is why this had happened in the first place. How terribly ironic.

“She’s angry because I’m not participating in this stupid thing where we act like the perfect nuclear family.”

Steve snorted. “That sounds familiar. You just gotta stay strong, kid.” He reached over to squeeze her shoulder, and Max shot him a grateful smile.

Steve reached over to turn on the radio, the peppy sounds of Wham!

filling the air between them.

“You know, I don’t think your mother liked me very much.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the long notes, y'all! Just trying to keep you lovely friends updated on what's up!

Updates are going to be... sporadic at best. I'll try to get 2-3 out a month, but it all depends on my workload of the week.

(Ps remember when I saw a light at the end of this tunnel? Yeah I'm taking requests to prevent that end for a liiiiittle while longer) ;)

ALSO there will be a Part 2 to this chapter soon!

13. Oh, Mother (Part 2)

Notes for the Chapter:

Proof I've lost all sense of time: I honestly thought my last update was five days ago. Oh well. Here's a little angst and some resolution to last chapter. Enjoy!

While Max hung out with the boys, Steve, Nancy and Jonathan took advantage of the afternoon- Nancy and Jonathan's first free day now that school was over. The summer was still in its early stages, making the high sun just warm enough for them to finally shed their jackets, and hike out to the old junkyard.

Steve perched on the top of the bus. From there, at the top of the hill, he felt like he could see all of Hawkins, the spires of the town church just peeking over the treetops. The horrible lab was far behind them, tucked away and closed down, for good. Steve stretched out, lying down on the warm roof. Freedom was in the air, and it tasted good.

And smelled like cigarettes. He pulled down his sunglasses and saw Nancy reaching up, offering him a drag of hers. They passed it back and forth, watching Jonathan walk around, taking close-up shots of the flowers growing between piles of tires, or the broken windshields of old cars.

"So, you won't believe what happened to me today," Steve began when Jonathan had finally joined them back at the bus. Now with a captive audience, he recounted his strange encounter with Mrs. Mayfield.

Nancy smacked his arm. "That happened this morning, and you waited until now to tell us?"

"Ow!"

"You've been holding out on us, Harrington."

"Shut up, Byers."

Nancy leaned her head against the side of the bus as Steve slid down to join them on the ground. "That sounded serious, though. What are you gonna do?"

"What *can* I do?" He rubbed his hands on his jeans "I have to take Max home. That was her mother. Plus, I have to stay on the right side of the law now, seeing as I now work for the law."

Jonathan patted his friend's shoulder. "I'm sorry, man. I know you hate that."

Steve shrugged, not saying anything. Nancy leaned her head on his shoulder. "Maybe that'll make her mom stay home more?"

Her words made him tense slightly. "She'd still have to be around Billy, and her dickhead stepfather. Having her mom there wouldn't do anything."

The girl pursed her lips. "Steve, you know you can't adopt Max. I know you want to look out for her, but even you have to realize there are limits to what you can do for her."

He balled his hands into fists in his lap. The worst part about it was that he knew Nancy was right. He couldn't claim this kid as his own. She wasn't an orphan, and she had no (legal) reason to be removed from her home. But still. It wasn't fair.

"She's not happy there." He gritted out.

"And all of our jobs are to make things better for each other." Jonathan said placatingly. "But we can't fix everything."

He felt himself deflating, like he was a balloon, and someone had stuck him with a needle. "I know. I just hope we can fix the important stuff."

—

Will had Super-Commed Steve to let him know he, Max, and Dustin would be at the Byers after the campaign ended. So, when the sun began to sink, kissing the tips of the trees surrounding them, the trio made their way to the Byers' house. Max and Will were coloring,

while Dustin was attempting to fold what would end up being a very sad paper crane.

Steve tapped his flame-haired friend on the head. "C'mon, red. It's time to roll."

She looked up, frowning. "Steve, it's only five thirty. You don't have work until, like, seven."

He furrowed his brow. "So? Your mom wanted you home by six. I don't want you to get in trouble."

A number of expressions flitted across Max's face in a moment, confusion, followed by hurt, before landing on anger. She shoved her chair back and stood up, glaring up at him. "And you're just going to listen to her? Are you kidding me?"

He'd been expecting this. "Max, this is your mom--"

"She means nothing to me at this point."

"--and she is your parent. She's your family."

"And you're not?"

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes against the oncoming headache. "I am, Max, but she's the one who has legal authority over you."

"So?" She hadn't moved an inch, face now as red as her hair, her arms tightly crossed. The others were staring at them in morbid curiosity. Steve frowned at them.

"Max, let's discuss this in the car."

She scoffed. "Not if you're just going to drive me back to her--"

"No. We're leaving." She didn't move. "Now, Max!" Steve yelled, raising his voice in a way he never had to her. It was harsh, and sharp, and loud. The look of betrayal she sent him was enough to immediately shrink his flare of anger. He was supposed to be the one person who didn't make her cry.

“Fine.” She whispered, pushing past him and throwing open the door.

Nancy raised an eyebrow at him. He just frowned at her, snatching his keys off the counter before following Max out, slamming the door behind him.

She was sitting in the passenger seat, obviously fuming, but also looking slightly apprehensive as Steve approached, and he felt a pang of guilt at having raised his voice. Wasn’t that what he was trying to help her avoid?

“I’m sorry.” He said as he started the car. Max didn’t look at him. The silent treatment. *Real mature*, he thought. “Obviously I don’t want you to be... stuck there. But if I don’t bring you home, who knows what your mother will say? She could call the police, or worse.”

A beat of silence passed between them at that thought. “But you are the police.” Max finally protested, quiet and hesitant and so unlike herself.

“I work *with* the police,” He corrected. “And if your mom has me arrested for kidnapping you? Think about what would happen, Max.”

“But-“

“No, Max, really think. What would happen.”

She fell silent, eyebrows drawing together. Then, a quiet, “Oh.”

“Yeah.” He shook his head. “I want to be there for you as much as possible, kid, but there are things even I can’t help you with. That’s where you have to be strong on your own. Be your own King Steve. Make your own spiked baseball bat. All that stuff.”

Max laughed, but it was thin, watery. He could tell she was holding back tears. She really didn’t want to go back, and he hated to send her there.

“Hey.” She looked at him. “Call me, anytime, day or night. If you’re really not safe, I’ll be here before you can say “demogorgon.” Okay?”

She nodded, meeting his eyes reluctantly.

“And I’ll pick you up first thing tomorrow. But I need you to do something for me tonight.”

Max tilted her head, her red curls falling over her shoulder. “What?”

He parked in front of the Mayfield’s house. “I need you to talk to your mom. Really talk to her. You might not be able to tell her everything, but tell her what you can.”

He’d expected the girl’s anger to flare up, but she simply frowned, asking in a challenging tone, “Why?”

“She misses you, Max.” A look of surprise dawned in her face. “I could tell. Just... try talking to her.” He handed her her duffel bag. “Please?”

Max bit her lip, staring at the purple bag in her hands. “Fine.” She said in that small voice. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bright and early. Eight.” He confirmed.

Max nodded, and then surged forward and gave him a tight hug. He squeezed back and waited as she walked up to the door. Mrs. Mayfield was at the door, glaring out at him distrustfully. He waved at her cheerfully, and turned around.

He knew that night that he’d be lonely. He had nightmares about Billy punching his lights out over and over again while someone was crying behind him, just beyond his periphery. He couldn’t fix everything, even with himself. But he hoped that he’d begun to help fix the important stuff.

Notes for the Chapter:

I just want Steve to adopt Max, but even my alternate universe has rules.

Any requests for things you want to see? I know I said this forever ago, but we only about five more updates before we reach the end. So let me know if you want me to work anything in before then! Hugs!

14. House Hunters

Notes for the Chapter:

While short, this is a chapter I'm excited about,
because plot progression! character development!
Steve being goofy! Enjoy!

"Nancy, Jonathan, I know what we're going to do today!" Steve announced brightly, entering the Byers' household with more pep than necessary.

Nancy hardly moved from her position, spread-eagled on the floor. "I hope it involves being covered in ice cubes. This heat wave is killing me."

Jonathan was shirtless and lying on the couch, holding a novel, but clearly not reading. "It's Steve, Nance. He's probably gonna make us climb Kilimanjaro." He turned an expectant stare to his friend. "Am I wrong?"

Steve waved away the sass. "That's next week. Today, we are... going house hunting!"

The exciting news was met with blank stares from the other two. "Why?" Nancy asked, tilting her head slightly.

"Because I'm moving out of my parents' house?" Steve said, as though it were obvious. "I've graduated, I'm working, I think it's time I found my own place. I don't want to be living off their dime anymore." He rubbed the back of his neck, not unaware of how naïve that statement made him sound. But Nancy and Jonathan weren't laughing at him.

"That's really great, Steve," Nancy said kindly. "But could we possibly do this on a day where going outside isn't the equivalent of walking on the sun?"

"That would be a negative," Steve tossed his newspaper in her direction. It landed on her sweaty face. "I circled all the good

listings.”

Jonathan barked out a laugh, fanning himself with his novel. “Just when I started thinking you were all right, Harrington, you go and pull this.” He peeled himself off the couch and began to root around for his shirt. “You’re driving.”

“Duh. And we’re getting ice cream.”

Nancy perked up. “Steve, you need to open with that offer next time.”

He flashed her a charismatic grin. “I’ll lead with my best foot forward. This’ll be fun.”

—

“This is impossible.” Steve groaned, collapsing onto Nancy’s former spot on the floor. They’d returned to the Byers’ after hours of fruitless apartment-slash-house hunting. Hawkins didn’t have many listings within his meager price range, and even less that weren’t a mix of terrifying and grotesque.

“That little place on Bellmont-“ Nancy started, but Steve cut her off.

“Had a door that didn’t open up all the way. The bed was in the kitchen, Nance.”

“Or was the kitchen in the bedroom?” Jonathan mused as he disappeared down the hall.

Steve re-read the ads he’d circled. “I guess that shack by the quarry wouldn’t be so terrible. A little silly putty and wood, and that hole in the wall would be fine.”

“Ah, that’s a no.” Jonathan was back, with a large rotating fan in hand. He plugged it in, and was rewarded with a kiss from Nancy. Steve puckered his lips, too, but Jonathan just tossed a pillow at him. “That place gave me the heebie-jeebies, man.”

“Oh my god, for the last time Jonathan, a ghost did not knock the ice cream out of your hand!”

"You don't know that." The boy grouched.

Steve leaned over to catch some of the fan's breeze. "Where's Max, anyway? I'd think she'd be at least, like, 50% invested in this, right?" Nancy asked as she pushed Steve out of the way.

"I'm making her spend more time with her mom, now that she's home more." He managed not to sound as dejected as he felt. He was happy she was spending time with her family- he was the one pushing for it- but he missed having his friend around- always there, always underfoot. "Anyway, it's not like there are any places I can actually move into."

"I just think today wasn't our day." Argued Nancy.

"Nance, it's Hawkins. No one will put anything else on the market for, like, six years."

Jonathan smiled grimly. "Unless the hell monsters come back. Then, there'll be plenty of free real estate."

Nancy turned to frown at her boyfriend. "Very funny, Jon."

The front door banged open before the two could begin bickering, and all three teens turned to see Joyce and Hopper shuffle in, each carrying ice bags the size of kindergartners in their arms.

"Oh, blessed day!" Steve exclaimed, leaping off the floor with surprising speed. He eagerly swept a bag out of Joyce's arms, clutching it close to his chest. "Oh," He sighed reverently. "Sweet relief."

Hopper didn't let the fun last. "We're putting all the ice in the freezer, Harrington." Joyce made a noncommittal humming noise. "Right, Joyce?"

"I might have told Will that if he and his friends are home in time for lunch, that we'd set up the kiddie pool... and put some ice in?"

Will was ecstatic. He and El had been in Castle Byers all day, but a tub full of ice was enough to draw them out of the woods for at least a couple of hours. El, on the other hand, was more apprehensive at

first, but Will's gentle coaxing coupled with the blistering afternoon heat encouraged her to sink into the ice cold water.

The teens dragged out the folding chairs from the shed and dipped their feet into the water while the younger kids splashed around in front of them. Steve took great pleasure into dropping ice cubes down Jonathan's back when the other boy wasn't paying attention. It was all too easy to sneak up on him.

An hour passed before the ice completely melted, and by that time, the sun was going down, and taking the unbearable heat with it. While El and Will wrapped themselves up in their towels, Steve ducked inside, where Joyce and Hopper were chatting in the kitchen.

"What else have you kids been up to today?" Joyce asked as Hop pushed what looked like a grilled cheese around on a pan. Neither were especially gifted in the kitchen, but Hopper could, at the very least, be trusted not to burn the house down.

Steve lowered himself onto the chair next to Joyce. "Oh, just boring adult stuff."

The couple exchanged amused glances and tittered. "Alright, I'll bite," Hop said magnanimously. "What kind of boring adult stuff?"

"House hunting. The market's real tough these days, you know." Steve suppressed a laugh, enjoying the sight of the spatula slipping out of Hop's hand and clattering onto the tile before him.

Joyce simply raised an interested eyebrow. "Oh?"

Steve repeated the same words he'd said that morning, and recounted the story of their fruitless search. "Hawkins only has so much real estate. I could wait until old man Humphrey dies, and try to swoop in there, but..." he trailed off with a helpless shrug.

Joyce whipped around to look at Hopper. "What?" He asked.

Joyce narrowed her eyes. "Don't 'what' me, Hop, you know exactly what I'm thinking."

"I think you're mistaking me with El."

“Jim.”

Hopper slid the grilled cheese onto the plate and frowned at her.
“No.”

“Why not?”

“Does anyone want to clue me in here?” Steve waved his hands to catch their attention.

Joyce turned to him, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “As it turns out, you haven’t looked at *all* the available places in Hawkins.”

Steve turned to Hopper, who was in the process of fixing another sandwich. “Chief?”

Hop let out a long, deep sigh, almost in pain. “Fine, Joyce.”

“Jim’s putting his old place up for sale, since he and El are living in the cabin permanently, now.” Her eyes were alight with excitement. “And I bet if you ask nicely, you can get a nice friends and family discount.”

“Joyce.”

“Maybe.”

Steve’s eyebrows pulled together. “That true, boss?”

Hopper cast his eyes skyward, and nodded. “Yeah, kid. It’s not much, but it’s got walls and a roof. All I really needed before.”

“That’s all I need, now.” Steve blurted before he could stop himself. Hop smirked.

“I guess we could talk about it. Here,” He tossed something over the counter. Steve plucked the keys out of the air before they could hit him or Joyce in the face. “Go and check it out. Don’t break anything.”

“Like there’s anything to break.” Joyce snorted.

Steve was already standing up. “Thanks, Chief. Joyce.” He nodded at the both of them before darting out, excitement churning in his gut. Somehow, without even having seen it, he knew that this was going to be his place.

Notes for the Chapter:

I wonder what Max thinks of Steve's new digs (she's gonna love it. You know my writing by now).
See y'all in two weeks!

15. New House

Notes for the Chapter:

A chapter with some... substance? Sounds fake. We don't do that here. Enjoy!

Steve didn't tell the others about the house for a few days. He wanted it to be his- just his- for a little while, as he took in the trailer. Every nook and cranny of his new home.

Hopper had emptied his things out of the entire place months ago, so all that was left was furniture with dust covers haphazardly tossed over everything. A beat-up looking couch, a tiny table next to the equally tiny kitchen. A bed frame and a bare mattress atop it. Bathroom, and a small room at the end of the house, to be used as a study or a second bedroom.

Moving was a hassle, but seeing the gaps in what he owned was even more stressful. He had a growing list of things he needed to buy, or could sneak from his parents' house. His mother preferred eating out to preparing food, and his father preferred drinking beer to eating anything, so kitchen supplies were a nonissue. But a plunger, dressers, a second bed frame and mattress, a bookshelf... the list was ever growing, as was his apprehension. Every five minutes, he'd pause and ask himself if he'd just made the biggest mistake of his young life. But then he'd pull up to his old house to get another box and feel a surge of confidence.

It took a week until he deemed the house both habitable and sharable.

Max was the first of the kids he told about the house. She had to be. He picked her up from the arcade one afternoon, and kindly but firmly told Dustin to bike home. ("Don't give me those eyes, Henderson, unless you want to come grocery shopping.")

"Steve, you missed the turn for the grocery store." Max pointed as they followed a now-familiar road towards the east side of town.

He glanced over and flashed his classic smirk to mask his nerves. "We're gonna go grocery shopping later, but I wanted to show you something first." And why was he nervous about showing the kid the new house? It was just a house. It was just a small, dingy, old house. But it was his.

"Are you taking me to the woods to kill me? Because I don't want to die before El sees the last Star Wars movie."

"She hasn't seen the entire trilogy?"

Max shrugged, sighing. "She gets distracted by plot holes. And she has problems with Luke's powers."

"Go figure."

They pulled up to the trailer. It looked shabbier than it had when he'd left 30 minutes before. Huh.

"What's this?" Max looked over at him suspiciously. "I was serious about the no murder thing."

"This... is my new house." He made little jazz hands. "Surprise."

"What?!"

After scooping her jaw up off the floor, Max gave the small house another, more thorough once-over. Steve sat stiffly, waiting for her verdict. "Well, are we just gonna sit out here?"

"Oh, no, right, there's an inside." Steve jumped out of the car and hurried towards the door. All of his cool was gone, and he realized it was because he really, really wanted his little sister to like his house. He'd accepted long ago that he relied on these kids as much as they relied on him. Their approval... well, it meant more than it should have.

Thankfully, the inside was in better shape than the outside. Hopper's house hadn't been a pit, but that didn't mean Steve hadn't spent far too long scrubbing dirt out of far too many corners the night before.

He watched quietly from the door while Max turned in a small circle,

taking in the wood paneling and contrasting wallpaper, ugly brown countertops, and sparse furnishings. His boombox stood out, perched on top of a half-filled bookshelf.

“It’s small.” She commented, her voice impassive.

“Yep.” Steve popped the “p”.

“But nice.”

“Turns out, once you get the cobwebs off of everything, it’s not half bad.”

Max finished her circle and turned to look at him tilting her head. “You said Hopper used to own it?”

He nodded.

She pursed her lips. “It suits you.”

Steve raised an eyebrow. “You think?”

Max stepped farther inside, running a hand along the kitchen countertop. “I mean, it’s small, but it’s still sunny. Got a pretty good kitchen,” They exchanged knowing grins. “And it’s not too far from the rest of us.”

“Location was a big factor.” Steve agreed, relieved that she seemed to like it. While location had, indeed been a big factor, Max’s approval had also been high up on the list. “Oh! Check this out! You’re gonna love this.”

He gestured for her to follow him as he led her through the master bedroom and to the sliding glass door. “Balcony. *In* the bedroom. How cool is that?”

Max raised her eyebrows and stepped out onto the deck. “Damn, that view though.”

Steve came up next to her and rested his elbows on the railing. “Right? I used to go swimming around here all the time when I was a kid. Never knew Hop’s house was, what, 300 yards away?”

Max smirked and bumped her shoulder with his. “*Your* house, now.” Something was wavering, slightly reserved behind her too-cool facade, but Steve couldn’t pick it out. Usually, it was best to let Max come to him instead of trying to pry it out of her.

He smiled. “My house. Has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

“You’re a real adult now. Your cool level just dropped, like, 30 points.”

Steve laughed. “I’ll take it. I’m finally closer to your level, now.”

Max rolled her eyes and told him he was a loser, so naturally Steve had to give her a noogie.

“Steve!”

“New town rules. Anyone who disrespects a police officer-“

“*Provisional* officer- ow!”

“Gets a good old fashioned noogie.”

—

“So, you really like it?”

Max glanced over from where she was looting through his cabinets. “Obviously.” She found the Oreos, hidden behind a box of Raisin Bran. “Seriously? You tried to hide these?”

Steve exhaled. “I was just worried.”

"About the Oreos?" He gave her a look. "Oh." She tossed him a cookie, and he caught it with fumbling hands. “Why? It’s your house- you don’t need my approval.” She didn’t meet his eyes, fiddling with her cookie.

He tilted his head, confused. “I mean, yeah, but it’s your place too.”

Max’s red curls as she whipper her head around to look at him, surprise coloring her features. “What?”

“What do you mean, what?”

She gestured to the trailer. “You’ve moved, and you’re making me spend more time with my mom. I get it.”

“Wait, you think- Oh god, Max, do you think I was trying to get rid of you?” She looked down, and Steve let himself feel like the biggest ass in the world. “No, kid, I told you. We’re family, too. Did I not show you your room? I set it up and everything.”

Her eyes were wide with shock. “My room?”

He laughed, leaping off the couch to sling his arm around her shoulders. “Duh. Dustin wasn’t gonna get a room. He can’t even make macaroni.”

“I knew you only wanted me around for my cooking skills.” The little quip was enough to know that everything was right with the world again.

Of course, when she saw her room, with the bed, new sheets, books, and posters he’d taken from the old house, she started crying.

(Future sleepovers with the party turned into fascinating games of sleeping bag Tetris, but no one ever complained.)

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm trash for this found family of two.

... Three chapters left? What?

Thanks for reading!

16. Mint Chocolate Chip

Notes for the Chapter:

A slightly more intense chapter? There's an argument (not between Steve and Max though!), and someone drops an f-bomb. Just a head's up!

It was a rare day when Steve didn't have the odd teenager or two hanging around (or, at times, literally hanging onto) him. Yet here he was, running errands on his own for the first time in... longer than he could remember.

For once, he was glad for the solitude. The station had been insane all day, and all Steve wanted was a cold beer, and a long nap. One quiet evening.

Naturally, the universe ignored his wishes. Walking out of Melvad's, he didn't notice the woman in front of him until he nearly knocked her over. "Oh, god, I'm so sorry-" He started, reaching out to steady her. Then he got a good look at her face. "Mrs. Mayfield."

The red haired woman's expression instantly soured. "Harrington."

After an uncomfortable beat, Steve chose to just nod at her, and dodge around her to get in his car, and get the hell away from that heated glare.

"Wait," She called, and he stilled. Turned to face her, apprehensive.

"Yes?"

Mrs. Mayfield cast her eyes skyward, as though asking for the gods above to grant her strength. "I want to... talk. To you." she said, each word sounding like it was being painfully pulled from her.

Steve just gaped. "*You* want to talk? To me?"

She frowned, but nodded. "Max told me to. She said, well, she said that we should try to, oh I don't know, 'connect' or something. Apparently we got off on the wrong foot."

Steve bit back a sarcastic comment, and instead nodded. "Can I just," He gestured to his car with the bag. "It might melt if I keep holding it."

"What is it?" Her voice was instantly suspicious. To be fair, he was holding an odd-shaped object in a paper bag. But honestly, his house was child friendly. What else would he be buying on a hot summer day?

Steve blinked at her. "Um. Ice cream?" He opened the bag to show her. "Mint chocolate chip."

Her nose wrinkled in disgust. "People actually like that flavor?"

Was she *trying* to be disagreeable? Steve turned to set the bag down on the passenger side floor before replying lightly, "Your daughter does. It's her favorite."

The look on Mrs. Mayfield's face was instantly gratifying. Then it turned to sadness, and Steve almost felt bad for her. *Almost*.

"So. You're my daughter's new idol, babysitter, and best friend, now?" The older woman shook her head, slumping against the side of his car. "I don't understand. You're just... you're friends? With a kid? Why?"

"Well, that's a loaded question." Steve propped an elbow up on the roof of his car, then winced at the heated metal. "The babysitting thing happened by accident, truth be told. I look after a whole bunch of kids. But Max..." He shook his head. "Billy is not a good person, Mrs. Mayfield. She didn't feel safe."

The woman bit her lip, a conflicted expression wrinkling her freckled face. "He's just lashing out. His father is hard on him. He'll grow out of it, I'm sure." Her voice, however, betrayed her lack of conviction.

"Both of my parents essentially walked out on me. And now I'm a police officer. I don't hit people, I work to ensure their safety. There's no reason excuse for Billy to be a terrible human being. You see these here?" He pointed to the fine scars near his hairline. "Courtesy of your stepson." His words were hard, and she flinched away from

them, from the scars. From the accountability. “Max didn’t feel safe because she wasn’t safe.”

Mrs. Mayfield still looked more than a little skeptical. “So, what? You start spending time with her out of the goodness of your heart?” She said it like an insult, as though she couldn’t possibly fathom someone doing something good simply because it was the right thing to do.

“Yes.” He replied plainly.

“What exactly do you do?”

“Pardon?”

Susan sighed. “I was worried, at first. A strange man, driving around with a young girl? I was afraid that... you know.”

Steve shook his head emphatically. “No. God, no. First of all, Max is like a sister to me. Second of all, just... *no*. I don’t know how many ways I can say that. I’ve been trying to protect her.”

“Well, how was I supposed to know that?” That sour look was back, and it was making his blood boil.

“By being around!” Steve exploded, slamming his hand against the hot roof of his car. Mrs. Mayfield jumped. “By being around your daughter. You should be the one who knows about how upset she gets, about the panic attacks and the nightmares. Some nights, she just reads so she doesn’t have to sleep. She’s been through more than you know- more than you can *ever* know, because you aren’t here.” He shook his head and made to open the door again. “You’re not here.” The words were soft, delivering more of a punch than if they were shouted, thrown at her like knives.

“She won’t tell me.” Susan called. “Last night, she woke up in the middle of the night, crying and screaming, and she wouldn’t tell me why. She still won’t.”

Steve widened his eyes comically. “Gee, I wonder why.” He scoffed, shaking his head. “She doesn’t trust you to keep her safe.”

"How would you know?" Angry tears had pooled in Susan's eyes. Steve didn't look away. "She's *my* daughter. I'm supposed to be the one she trusts the most. *Me*, not some punk-ass kid with a car and too much time on his hands."

"Oh, yeah? Well, how's that working out for you?"

"Fuck you!" She spat out, turning to storm away, as the tears began to spill over her cheeks.

Steve stepped forward to get in her line of vision- not quite blocking her, but not staying away. "Oh, no, we're not done here."

Mrs. Mayfield was well and truly crying now, and passerby were doing their best not to stare. "You don't understand." She choked out.

"What don't I understand?" He pressed, challenging her.

"I *can't* leave."

Her words instantly killed his anger. "What?"

"Neil. I c-can't leave." She swiped at her eyes, now red and puffy. Steve thoughtlessly handed her one of the tissues he always kept in his pocket for El- he'd never expected to hand one to Max's mother. She accepted it gratefully.

"Why not?" He asked, forcing his voice to be gentle- such a dramatic switch from the yelling he'd been doing just a moment before. He relied on all of his training to keep himself from reacting.

She shook her head while dabbing her eyes. "You wouldn't understand."

"I'm open to new ideas."

"I can't leave because I already divorced Max's father. What would the world think of a twice-divorced single mother?" Steve opened his mouth to respond, but Susan held up a hand. "I know what Hawkins is like. People talk, and I don't want people to treat Max... and if we moved, it would be even harder. We don't have money, I don't have a job... It's impossible. And Neil... he'd find me."

For a brief moment, Steve wondered if he could invite Mrs. Mayfield and Max to stay with him. But he could barely support himself and his frequent visitors- he couldn't take on one more. And Susan was right- Neil would find her instantly if they stayed in Hawkins.

"I don't know how to help you." He admitted.

Susan offered him a watery smile. "I wouldn't expect you to." She took a deep breath, straightening her shoulders. "I'm working on something, but until then..." she shook her head. "Max just has to be strong."

"Max could stay with me!" Steve blurted, and instantly wished he'd kept his mouth shut.

Mrs. Mayfield simply tilted her head. "What?"

Shit. Steve closed his eyes, willing his thoughts to come together to form a semi-coherent sentence. "Max? She could stay with me. I'm a cop, so that's a free police protection system right there. I've got a guest room, and Billy doesn't know where..." He trailed off, and shook his head. "You know what, that sounded creepy even to me. Wow, ignore everything I just said." He let out an embarrassed, breathy, almost-laugh and stepped back towards his car. "It was good to see you again, Mrs. Mayfield and I wish you the best of luck with everything. Tell Max I said hey."

He was halfway into the car when he heard a quiet, "Wait."

He froze, and poked his head up.

Mrs. Mayfield was biting at her pinky nail. "You said Billy doesn't know where it is?"

Steve shook his head. "It's the Chief's old place. He just moved, so I took it off his hands."

She nodded slowly. Steve waited. His leg started to cramp from the uncomfortable position.

"If..." She hesitated. "If I come over, tomorrow, and like what I see, I *might* allow Max to stay over there."

Hope leapt up in his chest, but he kept his expression neutral. “Why? When?” *What?* He was hopeful, but her somewhat sudden 180 made him more than a little curious.

“Neil and I are going out of town again.” *Of course.* “Max says she really trusts you, and that makes me want to trust you was well. If... If I can’t be there for my daughter... Well, I really want someone to be. A police officer wouldn’t be too terrible.”

Steve grinned- his cocky, soul-melting grin that used to get him out of too many absent slips and parking tickets. “You’ve got it, ma’am.” His expression softened. “I keep those kids safe. All of ‘em.”

His ice cream melted by the time he got home, and all of the chocolate chips had sunk to the bottom, but he didn’t care.

He was alone that night, but he didn’t have any nightmares. He slept while the loons cooed and the crickets buzzed and the night was dark.

Notes for the Chapter:

Next chapter will be lighter, I promise!!

17. Rain

Notes for the Chapter:

Another Mrs. Mayfield-heavy chapter! Because sometimes the story needs to move forward. Enjoy!

After Mrs. Mayfield officially allowed Max to stay with Steve while she was away, he was surprised to feel a weight off his chest that he didn't know he'd been carrying around. Max was already such an integral part of his life, but now, seeing her sprawled out with a book on the living room floor, or messing around in the kitchen with El was practically expected.

Steve had scrambled to erase the traces of Max's bedroom being, well, *her bedroom*, before Mrs. Mayfield came over the first time. He didn't think she'd appreciate the fact that he'd been pseudo-parenting Max for months behind her back. Soon after the visit, though, Max had promptly set everything back into order, and brought over even more of her belongings to decorate it with.

Even on days she was meant to spend the night at home, Max found excuses and reasons to avoid going back until the last possible minute. Just one more round of Dig Dug, or claims that Mike was asking for her help planning a campaign, or going to a movie with Lucas. Sometimes, she would just let herself into Steve's (because of course all the kids had keys), and cook to de-stress, and Steve would come home to an empty house but a full meal. He'd come to simply accept all of this as the new normal.

Which is why he was only mildly bemused when he answered the door on a rainy Tuesday afternoon to see Max's mother on his doorstep. "Mrs. Mayfield?"

Her raincoat hood was up, and a few strands of her fire-red hair were fluttering out from under it. "Can I come in?" It had been raining for days, and Steve's from yard had turned into a muddy mess, and her green rain boots were flecked with dirt.

"Yeah, sure..." Steve stepped aside. "What brings you all the way out

here?" He reached for her rain jacket to hang up on the rickety coat rack Joyce had given him as a housewarming gift.

Susan paced the length of the living room, wringing her hands. Steve placed his hands on the back of an armchair, but didn't sit. He watched her and waited. The Clash played quietly in the background (one of Jonathan's many mix tapes).

"I'm doing it," She said, so quietly at first that Steve thought he'd imagined it. "I'm doing it." She said louder this time. "I'm leaving Neil." She looked Steve directly in the eye as she spoke, a steely determination in her eyes, and in that moment she looked nearly identical to her daughter.

Steve's mouth opened and closed a couple of times, processing this new information at a sluggish pace. "So, you're... leaving. Neil. Your husband. Okay?"

She nodded, tucking her curly hair behind her ears. "And I'm leaving Hawkins. I've never liked this place much- no offense. It's just so cold, and so... Midwestern. There's no ocean, and there's not enough people. I'm going back to California."

Finally, what she was really saying clicked in his brain. "You and Max are leaving." His voice was flat, emotionless. Inside though, his stomach dropped like a stone, and his mind was whirling.

Susan nodded. "I know you're close with her," She paused to roll her eyes. "Okay, I know she's practically adopted you, which is why I came here in the first place."

"You came to personally tell me that you're whisking her away to California? Well, thank you *so much*." Steve snapped sarcastically before he could stop himself. Susan raised an eyebrow and he instantly demurred. "Sorry." He mumbled, turning away and running a hand through his wild hair.

"I came here to run an idea by you, and possibly come to a conclusion."

"What idea?"

"I'll tell you if you actually face me. I'm not having this conversation with your back." Steve sighed, and faced her again, sinking into the armchair. Mrs. Mayfield perched on the couch. "As I was saying, I know Max is close with you. I also understand she's made many friends since we moved here, which is... new. Max wasn't one for friends in California- at least, not friends who didn't hang out at that skate park of hers." Susan shook her head as if dismissing the memory. "I know Max loathed me for making her move all the way out here last year, but... I think she would loathe me even more if I made her move back." She gave him a significant look.

Steve's eyes widened, and he leaned forward in the chair, resting his elbows on his knees. "Mrs. Mayfield, what are you saying?"

She brushed a strand of hair out of her face. "I'm saying, I'm inclined to give Max an option. High school in Hawkins, with regular visits from me, or high school in California. But before I asked her, I wanted to make sure she had a place to stay, if she chooses Hawkins."

Steve gaped at her. "You're really... but you're her mother... and of course, but..." His mouth couldn't keep up with his brain, and blessedly, Susan seemed to understand.

"I'm her mother, yes. And I love her more than anything on this Earth, never doubt that. But I've never truly understood Max, and I don't feel like I've ever been able to give her what she wants. But I'm trying to do that now." For the second time, Steve saw Mrs. Mayfield blinking back tears. "I just want her to be happy. She was so sad for so long, but now?" She shook her head, a rueful smile peeking out from behind her tears. "She's like a new person."

Steve sat back, trying to figure out how to respond. He knew most of this, but somehow it was different hearing it from Mrs. Mayfield, as opposed to Max herself. "You want Max to stay with me?" He asked, cautious.

Susan nodded. "If it's not a strain, and if she says yes."

"It's not a strain." He responded instantly. It was a bit of a white lie- the house was a drain on much of his savings, but his paycheck kept

him covered week to week with some to spare. "I'm working, full time." He hesitated, measuring his words before asking, "What happened to the twice-divorced issue?"

He'd expected Max's mother to snap at him, or tell him it was none of his business. What he didn't expect was the secret smile she allowed as she stood up, going to shrug on her raincoat. She brushed a stray teardrop from her freckled cheek. "Oh, I think this divorce would be understood. Encouraged, even." He followed her to the door as she stepped outside. The rain had let up significantly, and was now just a light drizzle. "Keep your radio on, Officer Harrington." She gave him a slight wave before sliding into her car, and pulling out onto the dirt road. Steve just stood in his doorway, wondering what had just happened.

The next day, Steve was filing paperwork when a tall, loud man was brought in, struggling and cursing at Callahan, who was calmly reminding the man not to incriminate himself any worse. "Mr. Hargrove, I hate to break it to you, but money laundering coupled with tax evasion is still illegal."

Three days later, Max ran out of her house and hurled herself directly into Steve's arms, who had been leaning against his car, waiting for her. He let out a dramatic *oof*, and stumbled before returning the hug. "What's with the affection, Little Red?" He kept his voice light, though his pulse was racing. He hadn't seen her or her mother in days, and knew they were talking through their options.

She looked up at him, eyes sparkling. "I can't just hug you?" He poked her in the side and she dropped her arms to swat his hand away. "No need to get violent, Harrington."

"Says the most violent D&D Player in Indiana." Her face gave away her surprise, and Steve laughed, glad to have a one-up on her. "Mike tells me everything." He paused. "Okay, Mike tells Lucas, Dustin, and

Will everything, and those three have big mouths.” Max raised an unimpressed eyebrow. “Okay, fine, Mike tells El everything, and I bribe her with Eggos and ice cream to tell *me* everything.”

Max doubled over with laughter, her grin nearly splitting her face. Steve joined her after a few heartbeats, giving into the absurdity of it all.

Once they caught their breath, however, his apprehension returned, and he decided to stop beating around the bush. “So, what are you going to do?”

She gave him an unimpressed look. “Dude. You didn’t guess?”

His eyebrows came together. “Um, no?”

Max rolled her eyes. “I’m staying, dummy. Can’t let my idiot friends be alone for too long.” She paused, giving him a slightly hesitant look. “As long as you’re still okay with that?”

This time, it was Steve who wrapped her up in a bone-crushing hug, pouring all of his relief and excitement into the embrace. For three days, he had been wondering if he was about to lose the closest thing he could call family, and if it was selfish of him to want her to stay. He’d forced himself to step back and let her be, let her make her own decision. And here she was, telling him under no uncertain terms, that this was where she wanted to be.

After a long moment, he released her. She stepped back, beckoning for him to follow her into the house. “My mom wants to talk.”

He followed her as the rain finally stopped, and the sun tentatively peeked out from between the clouds.

Notes for the Chapter:

You didn't think I'd actually separate my favorite brotp? I high-key took the "I never understood my daughter" thing from Matilda.

To clarify, it was Neil who was arrested, not Billy. I imagine Billy high-tailed it outta there once his dad was taken in.

One more chapter, and an epilogue! I promise the rest of the group will feature more in those chapters. As always, thanks for reading!

18. Who Am I?

Notes for the Chapter:

Y'all, I wrote this chapter ages ago when I thought this fic would be 4 chapters. But I decided it was still the perfect "ending" here. This fic has always been about Steve, and this chapter reflects on how much he's grown. All that's left now is the epilogue!

ONE YEAR LATER

It was another slow day at the station.

After the demogorgon, the mind flayer, and battling the demons of hell with nothing but a spiked baseball bat, most police business around Hawkins could qualify as... dull.

He finished his paperwork the day before, and there was absolutely nothing to do. He wandered aimlessly around the station, fixing the faulty mechanism in the coffee machine, so it would stop randomly spurting out hot water instead of actual caffeine. He picked the lock to Hopper's office to pass off the Chief's cigarettes to Flo, and picked up the book Nancy had left at his house. ("It was for one of these classes I had to take for no reason, but I figured you'd appreciate it.") It was Criminal Justice 101. Turns out, when you read them for pleasure, textbooks suddenly got way more interesting.

A lot of the contemporary stuff he'd learned during training at the station, but the history was fascinating- the chapter about vigilantes was easily his favorite.

A sudden burst of commotion in the front startled him out of his book- a guy was struggling against his restraints, being dragged in by Callahan. "It was just a stupid dare!" the guy was complaining, cheeks red under the freckles on his face. Steve realized with a start that this was Tommy H. *Jesus*, he hadn't seen that guy in two years.

"Throwing a rock through Anne's Crafts and writing 'Fairy' on the window isn't a stupid dare," Callahan said in that always-exhausted

voice of his. Steve felt his stomach drop. "It's illegal, and you were dumb enough to do it anyway." He handcuffed the man to his desk, turning to get the processing paperwork from Flo.

Steve was quietly seething with rage from his desk. Will was working at Anne's, saving up money for art school. He wasn't out to anyone outside of the party, but people had been talking for years before then. Tommy H. seemed not to have noticed Steve yet, preferring to glare at his handcuffed wrists.

"Harrington," Callahan clapped him on the shoulder, causing Tommy to whip up his head, narrowing his eyes as he zeroed in on his former friend. Steve pretended not to notice. "We're going out for drinks tonight. You in?" Steve made a reluctant face and his coworker groaned. "Come on, you bailed last week, man!"

"I came last week! I just left early."

"You left after, like, an hour."

He shrugged helplessly. "Life of a single parent to high schoolers." Callahan laughed, but not unkindly. It was no secret around the station that Steve was looking out for the local nerds, but since Chief Hopper was now the parent of two of those nerds, no one ever dared make fun of him. "I'm taking Will and Dustin to the movies- I promised if they got A's on their exams, I'd take them."

Tommy H., however, seemed not to have gotten the memo. He sneered at Steve from his seat. "Jesus, Harrington, you're driving around the fairy, and toothless? You a queer, too? Lose your girlfriend, so you turn into a--"

Steve was out of his seat and gripping Tommy's collar in a flash. He leaned in close, his eyes flashing dangerously, and Tommy finally looked a little bit scared. "You wanna say that again, loser? Because one of us is wearing handcuffs, and the other has a fun assortment of weapons. I'm sure Callahan wouldn't mind if I... accidentally Tazed you once or twice." He smirked, though there wasn't an ounce of friendliness in his gaze as he shoved Tommy back into his seat, hard. "So I'd think twice about what you say around me. Or anyone, for that matter."

Steve grabbed his hat and keys from his desk. "I'm going on patrol." He announced, and Flo didn't try to stop him. Callahan didn't mention that the other deputy was already on patrol. The station was silent as he banged his way out of the station.

The town was, as usual, its quiet, lazy Wednesday self. Aside from the police tape at the window of Anne's, and the small group of people pausing to watch Powell take witness statements, there was no one around. Eventually, he got bored. It was noon, and he decided to stop in to the local diner for a burger, and maybe a salad. Max kept telling him fries were gonna make him get fat, which he countered with waving the cookie box in her face.

The diner was almost empty, which is why he was surprised to hear cries of "Steve! Oh, look, it's Deputy Steve! Do you think he remembers us lowly peasants? Can I get an autograph?"

He rolled his eyes, grinning and turning towards the booth where Nancy and Jonathan were sitting, sipping on Cokes and waving at him like maniacs.

"What are you guys doing here?" He asked, pleased, leaning down to hug each of his friends.

"We're on fall break, we came back to surprise you!" Nancy told him, her eyes sparkling. "We were gonna wait until you got off, but looks like you're already slacking."

"It's not slacking if there's no work." He informed her, easily settling back into their witty banter. Jonathan laughed out loud, shaking his head at his friend as Steve slid in next to him on the vinyl booth. "I'll have you know I am *willingly* reading Nancy's criminology textbook. I might even take some more classes this spring. I really want to get a degree in something related to the justice system, you know?"

Nancy and Jonathan made appreciative noises. Before he could ask them about their semesters, though, a voice sounded behind him, "That's not the Steve Harrington *I* know."

The first thought that raced through his head was *Two in one day?*. Still, he plastered on a smile and turned around to look at his father,

who was glowering down at him, hands tucked in the pockets of his impeccably creased suit pants. "Hey, there, dad. Long time, no see." It was true. He hadn't seen his parents more than twice since moving out. Once by accident at the grocery store, and once from his window when his mother darted out of her car to leave him a present on his stoop on his birthday. She'd been alone. Max had flipped the bird at her from the kitchen window.

"I heard you've been playing family with that Mayfield girl." His father said derisively. "Didn't know you had a thing for minors. Guess I missed our similarities all these years."

Normally, as of late, Steve was a level-headed guy. Never let emotions get the best of him on the job, making an effort to *think* before he spoke or did something that might get him fired. But Steve was already on edge. That comment, that implication that he would *ever* treat Max like... like...

All he saw was red, and a moment later, his father was pressed against a wall, and Steve's arm was crossed threateningly across his throat. Nancy gasped, but Jonathan placed a hand on her arm, keeping her from jumping in the middle of the conflict. "That girl is more my family than you *ever* were." Steve growled menacingly. "You want to hate me for adopting a kid, fine. You want to hate me for becoming a police officer, not going to college, and not being as miserable as you, that.is.fine. But don't you *ever* equate me to you. Don't you ever think I'm as sick as those lowlifes I lock up. And don't you ever," He leaned in closer now, gently cutting off a little air from his father. "Provoke me again." He stepped back and thanked whatever gods existed that Deb was still in the back, and his only witnesses would back him up no matter what.

His father was rubbing his neck, staring at Steve with renewed distaste. "What happened to you?" He asked. It wasn't a compliment. "Who are you?"

He heard his friends moving behind him, ready to hold him back if necessary. Steve huffed out a humorless laugh. "Who am I? I'm a deputy police officer of Hawkins. The son who was forgotten by his parents. I'm the guy who found a sister, and then a brother, and then a family. I'm a student." He was still backing up, back towards his

booth. He spread his hands. "I'm not stuck in a suburb, hating my life, my wife, or our white picket fence. I'm actually happy. I'm everything your cowardly ass could never be. Because here's what, dad," He sat down, though everything in his words showed he still had the high ground. "I was brave enough to listen to the people who believed in me. I listened to the people who *stayed*." He leaned back in his seat, playing with his badge, which flashed under the bright diner lights. "Now, if you'd like to have lunch with me and my friends, you're more than welcome. If you'd like to ask about my little sister, I'd be happy to tell you about how she's doing in school, and how she's the best sprinter on the track team. But if you want to simmer in your disappointment about the son you forgot you had, I'd advise you do that elsewhere. After all," He smiled blandly. "I have the upper hand this time. The entire Hawkins police department is by my side."

His father snarled, but Steve wasn't afraid. He hadn't been afraid of his father in a long time. He just stared at the man placidly until Mr. Harrington showed signs of discomfort from the three young adults' daring looks. His father flipped him off and stormed out of the diner. Steve let out a breath of relief and sank back into his seat. Nancy reached across the table for his hand, as Jonathan rubbed his shoulder encouragingly.

"Are you okay?" She asked, her round eyes wide.

Steve shook his head, suddenly exhausted.

"That was amazing, dude." Jonathan praised him. "The way you just stood up to him?"

Nancy nodded, smiling at him. "You did amazing."

Steve let out the breath he had been holding. He was not going to have a breakdown in Deb's diner. He realized he hadn't taken a full breath during that entire episode. "He's still an asshole."

His friends nodded easily. "He really is."

"I don't think you have to worry about him." Jonathan said wryly. Steve raised an inquisitive eyebrow at him. "I have the upper hand?"

That's a power play, dude. Even your dad wouldn't mess with the police."

They didn't elaborate on the "this time" or the implications if came with. They didn't need to. Instead, they talked about Nancy's chemistry classes, Jonathan's photography, and how Max was doing in track. And when Steve went back to the station, promising to stop by at Joyce's later to catch up more completely, he felt lighter and freer than he had in years.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all so much for your kudos and comments and bookmarks! Y'all give me the inspiration to keep writing, and I appreciate each and every one of you
<3 See you soon for the epilogue!

19. Epilogue

Notes for the Chapter:

Y'all. I cranked out this beast of a chapter in just one day because I love you. Thanks for riding this roller coaster of feels with me. It's been a real adventure. Enjoy! <3

Finals were going to be the death of him, Lucas was sure. And if he somehow managed to survive those, he was still constantly dodging the “rest of his life” and “which college are you going to” questions from (mostly) well-meaning family members.

He confessed all of this to Erica one day while laying down with his head hanging upside down off her bed. “Well, have you figured out what you want to do for the rest of your life?” She asked baldly, not looking up from her nails. She was painting them a sparkly blue that pained Lucas to even look at.

“No,” He said peevishly. “But I’m tired of bullshitting my answers. How the hell am I supposed to decide what I want to do at seventeen?”

Erica simply shrugged, switching to her other hand. “You’re not. But you have to make a decision soon. Everyone around here goes to college. Dad would kill you if you deferred.”

Lucas frowned. “Steve did, and now he’s practically the chief of police.”

“Exception to the rule.” Erica waved away his protest. “And besides, you told me he’s doing community college.” Lucas thumped his head against the mattress, frustrated. “Why aren’t you hanging with your nerd friends?” He shot his sister a glare, though there was very little heat behind it. She raised one sparkly hand in surrender.

“Everyone’s either working or doing homework.” Neither of them mentioned Max, whose schedule still lined up perfectly with his. Their breakup hadn’t been especially messy, but it still hurt to see

her, brazenly pretending it hadn't affected her at all. He'd been letting out all of his frustration on the soccer pitch lately, but they didn't have practice this week, and he was getting antsy.

Erica heaved a long suffering sigh, and finally set aside her nail polish. "Alright, big bro. I'll help you. But it's only so you'll get out of my room. You're being pathetic. Bring in the stupid brochures Mom keeps leaving you."

Mrs. Sinclair was over the moon when Lucas showed her all the applications he'd filled out over the past week, and Erica smirked at him from behind her book. Mike's tackle hug practically knocked him over when he found out they were planning to apply to almost all the same schools. "WE CAN BE ROOMMATES, MAN!"

"El," He choked out. "This white boy is trying to kill me."

In an instant, Mike was floating a good foot or two off the ground, and El pushed past her boyfriend to sling a protective arm around Lucas, despite being almost a full head shorter than him. "You really want to live with that?" She asked, jerking a thumb towards Mike, who subsequently dropped to the ground with a loud "Oof!"

Lucas offered her a half smile. "Someone has to keep him in line."

Dustin let out a loud cheer as he and his friends stepped out of Hawkins High, leaving exams, stress, and junior year behind. Max smacked him in the shoulder, rolling her eyes. "Shut up, Henderson. They can still give you detention."

"They'd have to catch me first!" He crowed, dangling his car keys in her face. Max frowned and made a swiping motion to grab them, but Dustin simply danced backwards, jerking them just out of her reach.

"Whatever." Max stuck her tongue out at him and turned to grab El, who was talking animatedly with Will.

Mike and Lucas appeared next to him. "Arcade?" Mike asked, jingling the quarters in his pocket.

Dustin shook his head and showed him the bottle he'd stashed in his backpack that morning. "We're getting righteously trashed, my friend. I've got beer in the car."

"Want to say that any louder?" Lucas hissed, closing Dustin's bag and shoving it back into his arms.

He shouldered the pack and shrugged. "No one cares." He made eye contact with El, jerking his head towards the parking lot. "Let's meet at the lookout."

Fifteen minutes later, the group was gathered around the small fire pit they'd built years ago, though today the logs remained un-lit. Mike and El were sitting with their backs against the rusting bus, watching as Lucas and Will played Frisbee. Max and Dustin clinked bottles before downing their first sips. Max came up for air first, coughing. "Dustin, this stuff is shit."

He grinned at her. "I know. It's what fucks you up the most."

With renewed interest, Max inspected her drink. "Fair point."

Dustin stretched his arms up, cracking his shoulders and sighing in relaxation. "I'm so over high school."

Max leaned back, resting her beer on her knee. "Come on, it's not terrible."

"I swear, *As I Lay Dying* was written for the express purpose of seeing how long we could read it before wanting to claw our eyes out."

"The title actually describes how you'll feel while reading the book."

Will walked up to them, a hand on his forehead to shield his eyes from the sun. "Still complaining about *As I Lay Dying*?" He reached down to grab a beer from the box.

"It's the worst book in known history."

Will shrugged, twisting the cap off in a swift, easy movement that surprised both of his friends in stunned silence. "I dunno, I thought it

was pretty good. It's one of Jonathan's favorites."

Max rolled her eyes, but a small smile came to her face. "Of course it is."

The last three beers began levitating, and Dustin watched without surprise as El distributed them out to the rest of the group, though she kept Mike's just out of reach, laughing as he tried to grab at it, though he always ended up grasping empty air. It was her favorite game to play with all of them, and the group had developed several different strategies over the last few years to outsmart the telekinetic girl, but Mike always let her mess with him. Dustin figured it was because he was a disgustingly romantic sap.

"You guys ready to be adults?" Dustin asked, looking out on the treetops of Hawkins. Max reached over and placed a hand over his mouth, effectively silencing him.

"Shh. You might catch adulthood early." She said.

"I'm ready to get out of Hawkins," Will said, settling down on the grass. "Go somewhere more... somewhere bigger, you know?. New York, or San Francisco, for example."

Dustin squeezed his friend's shoulder. "You'll do great, buddy. If Jonathan can get into NYU, you can, too."

Will shot him a grateful smile, and they turned back to watching Lucas and El play a version of telekinetic Frisbee which involved a lot of flying and very little throwing. This was the one place they could really let loose and be themselves. El didn't have to hide her powers, and everyone became louder versions of the selves they kept hidden during the day. Dustin wondered what they would do when they all went away.

—

Will splashed cold water on his face, staring into the mirror, willing the dark circles under his eyes to go away. Another nightmare.

The nights where he awoke in a cold sweat were becoming more frequent, but he wasn't running from a hell monster, this time. He

was running from other people, and that was much, much more terrifying.

There was a soft tap on the door. Without asking who it was, he opened the door to let El in. Ever since she'd rescued him from the Upside Down, they'd had a strange bond, something that only grew stronger once they'd actually met in person. Sometimes, he felt that she was the only person who really knew him- more so than even Mike. Senior year was getting closer, but he didn't feel like he ruled the school- or anything else, for that matter.

"Another one?" She asked quietly, sitting down on the edge of the tub. Her long hair was braided, resting on one shoulder. She looked small, drowning in sweatpants she'd stolen from Mike, and a too-big t-shirt with a caricature Will had drawn on it.

He nodded, unable to meet her eyes. She reached out to him with her mind, trying to give him comfort where others could not. He was the only one who had the option to open or close his mind to her, but the days where he had been closed off to her had become fewer and farther between.

Earlier, before he'd become her brother, before he'd ever met her, he'd been jealous of her. Who was this girl who had stolen Mike's heart, and taken the best parts of him with her when she'd died? Even when she'd come back, and he'd returned to his former self, and became the Mike Will had loved the best, he still barely kept from seething with jealousy every time the two made awkward eye contact, or held hands, or kissed when they thought no one was watching.

But then, while he wasn't paying attention, he'd ended up befriending El. And, against his own will, he'd ended up liking her. By the time she became his sister, they were as thick as thieves. He knew his crush on Mike would never go away, but it had faded. It wasn't fair, but then, what in his life was?

El tapped his hand, bringing him back to the present. He sat down next to her and she wrapped him up in a tight hug, and he opened his mind to her, letting her see tonight's nightmare. Same scene, different cast. She hummed, sensing his distress.

Piece by piece, she replaced the images in his head with ones of their friends, the people they trusted. The feeling of riding in Lucas's car with the windows down, hair whipping in the wind. Laughing at Mike so hard his stomach hurt. Every time his mother reached up to give him one of her hugs (Joyce truly gave the warmest and sweetest hugs). Hopper framing one of his better drawings, and seeing another one proudly displayed in the station.

She gave him images of his life, the best parts, where he knew he was undeniably loved.

He slumped, the tension draining out of his muscles. "Thanks, El." He whispered hoarsely. She simply laid her head on his shoulder in wordless support. He'd grown in the past few years, shooting up past his mother, to the point of almost meeting his stepfather in height. But here, he felt like El was the one who could almost cover him.

He missed Jonathan like crazy on nights like these, but he had to admit that his sister was a pretty good substitute.

—

She should be used to having parents at this point. She'd had them since she was thirteen, after all. That was five years of having a home, having a person- people, really- caring about her, and not just what she could do.

Still, El was shocked by the fact that every time she woke up, she was in a house, in her own clothes, with a family. She could go for a run if she wanted. She could do homework and learn about the stars in the sky. She could make waffles or roast beef sandwiches or do nothing at all. She could go to Will's room and flop on his bed, waking him up so she could talk about everything and nothing, and pick her word for the day- a private activity she only shared with him and Hopper.

And she had Mike. He was the thing she loved most about her life. Just the mere fact that he was in it. He loved her, flaws and all, and she loved him right back.

Hopper had been resistant to their relationship in the beginning-

worried that such an intense and codependent (one of her words for the day many years ago) relationship could stunt her growth as a singular person. But she explained to him, as best as she could, that Mike was a part of her. He made her feel like a real person, not just a freak, a messed up science experiment gone wrong.

Senior year had begun, and El was back to pretending that the crowds of loud, smelly teenagers didn't cause her extreme anxiety. Thankfully, she had the protective armor of her friends, who consistently surrounded her, and checked in on her, and kept her occupied when she began feeling jumpy. Max and Will were her constant companions most days- Mike and Lucas were in Advanced Placement. ("Nerds" Dustin would snigger as they crammed for exams). (One time they managed to successfully bury Lucas under the combined amount of his and Mike's flashcards).

She and Max shared homeroom, and spent mornings either diligently working on homework, or coming up with more ridiculous and outlandish ways to prank their friends. Sometimes, they'd have whispered conversations about feelings and fears that were far too deep for 8 am, but that didn't stop them. They'd discussed Max and Lucas's breakup at length, and El still didn't fully understand it, which frustrated her more than she cared to admit. The two still cared greatly for each other, but Max insisted it wouldn't work between them. He was too smart, too good for her. She didn't want to bring him down. El shook her head, wondering how she could convince her friend that smarts weren't the only thing that mattered.

She and Will would walk together to classes, because kids left him alone if they knew he was with his sister. The rumors about her ranged from black belt in Krav Maga to a frighteningly accurate speculation about having superpowers. Regardless, it kept strangers off her back, and those who didn't listen regularly to the rumor mill were the kind of people she liked the best.

Lunch was spent with the entire group, usually outside on the quad. She'd hold hands with Mike, eat her sandwich, and watch as Dustin and Lucas kicked a soccer ball back and forth. Dustin was on the football team (a move that shocked everyone but Steve), but after they'd broken a window practicing their passes, they'd focused on a more ground-based sport.

After school was track practice with Max. She had fallen in love with track in sophomore year, the first time she'd been allowed in real school, having finally caught up to her friends academically. It was freeing, knowing her only goal was to run as fast as she possibly could. Hopper was worried about the recognition she was getting, after she brought home two state championship trophies, but her documents and subsequent cover story held strong.

Steve would pick the two of them up after practice, and drop El off at home, before driving off with Max, often bickering about either cooking or the plot of a book they were both reading. By the time she'd finished showering and changing, Mike would be there, hanging out with Will. Her stepbrother made gagging noises whenever she and Mike so much as made eye contact.

Luckily, no one ever bore witness to the... *heated* kisses they exchanged behind the house before he had to head home. Even now, five years later, she still felt giddy after every kiss, every date.

Before, in the early days, she had always feared she wasn't enough for Mike. Too inexperienced, too dumb, too *weird* to ever be loved by him. When he'd come to her, confessing he thought *he* wasn't good enough for her, she'd laughed for minutes after, swiping tears out of her eyes as she told him that she, under no uncertain conditions, thought he was perfect. They grew together, and grew up together. They loved each other fiercely, no one could deny it.

Joyce had given her an awkward, hilarious version of the talk a few years back, when El had gotten her first period and thought she was dying. The conversation turned into a dating do and don't list, and El clutched the hot water pack to her abdomen, trying to focus on her mother's advice. The mention of Mike's name was what caught her full attention, though. "What you two have is different than... Well, than anything, honey. Don't let anyone- even your dad- tell you otherwise." As usual, somehow Joyce was able to be more understanding than should have been possible, and El was eternally grateful that this was the wonderful woman who had collected her when she was still a broken mess, and loved her regardless.

"Do you ever wonder how you ended up here?" El asked one day. It was a strangely warm October afternoon, and she and Mike were

lying on the sun-warmed roof of the bus on the lookout point, hands interlaced. It was just the two of them that afternoon. She relished in the quiet between the two of them, broken only by the faint sound of their breathing.

Mike rolled his head to the side to look at her. "I'm guessing you don't mean how we literally got here? Because I could tell you about the process of driving my car all the way here and—"

She bumped his shoulder with his. "You know that's not what I mean." His freckled face still wore a stupid smile, and she had to smile back. "I mean here," She said, squeezing his hand for emphasis. "How I went from a lab rat who didn't know what the word 'friend' meant, to here, with the best life anyone could ask for." She knew her family wasn't rich, but they weren't poor. She argued with her father about everything and nothing, and sometimes she cried when she felt like she would never be as smart or normal as anyone else. But more often than not, she was happy.

Mike shrugged, and El found herself taking in the planes and shape of his face, the constellations of his freckles, and the curl of his hair. It was her favorite thing to do- she probably knew his face better than her own. "I think, if there's something like fate, it wanted you to be happy. Or maybe this is a huge version of cosmic karma, making up for... well, your entire life."

She smiled again, leaning in for a quick, sweet kiss. "I love you, Mike."

"I love you."

—

Mike shoved the papers out of his way, resting his head on the deck, closing his eyes. The repetitive, dull forms seemed burned to the backs of his eyelids, and he groaned, thumping his head against his desk. How did Nancy apply to so many schools without losing her mind? He wanted to throttle someone, possibly himself, after the third. Iterations of his application essays were scattered on the floor behind him, crumpled, half-hearted and half finished. The prompt, a simple "Who are you?" had seemed easy enough to try and tackle at

first. A week later, he wanted nothing more than to be the person who was done with college applications. NYU, UIB, Stanford... all the letters and names swirled around his head like alphabet soup, and he found himself questioning if he even wanted to go to college, anyway. Back before summer, he'd been just as motivated as Lucas to applying to college, but then he'd procrastinated more and more, even as Lucas urged him to hurry up so they could send them at the same time. He just couldn't get up the energy to write.

El and Max had made a game of the applications, in addition to applying to their schools, had applied to faraway places, like Hawaii and Ireland, (and Maine, a tradition started by Steve) and even a few Ivys, despite knowing they couldn't get in. Mike wished he had the same joy that they did.

Lucas had finished his applications ages ago, choosing the Early Acceptance route, claiming he wanted to know where he was going before Christmas, to get his family to shut up about it. Mike wondered if the holiday spirit would finally kick him into finishing at least his essay. Probably not, but anything was better than going downstairs and listening to Holly's rendition of Blue Christmas. He set his pencil to paper, bracing himself for another headache.

Who am I? He wondered, doodling a sword in the corner of the page. *I'm a dungeon master.* He made a bullet point and wrote that down. Maybe the admissions team would have a sense of humor, or a soft spot for nerds.

I'm a storyteller. I helped save the world a couple of times. I'm a leader. I'm stupidly in love with my girlfriend. I have a bunch of great friends. We're all a little weird, but that's okay. Once he'd started writing, suddenly he couldn't stop. The facts came pouring out of him, and his handwriting turned into nothing more than messy chicken scratch as his pencil tried to keep pace with his mind. *I used to be afraid of everything, but I found out that I'm stronger than I think. I want to do something important. I want to make people's lives better.*

By the time he'd finished writing, his hand was cramping, and the only light in his room was coming from his desk lamp. Setting down his pencil felt like he was coming up for air after a long time under water. He leaned back in his chair, eyes flitting over the mess he'd

written, and saw a thread begin to emerge. Biting his lip, he grabbed a marker, circled a few sentences, and flew downstairs to hop on the family computer.

The next day, he showed El his paper, and watched as her eyes lit up with delight as she read. “Mike, this is amazing!” She said, handing it back to him.

“You really think so?” He asked anxiously.

She rolled her eyes- a habit picked up from spending too much time with Max. “Yes. It sounds like *you*. It’s interesting, but kind of funny, and reads more like a story than an essay.” She pressed a kiss to his cheek before patting his chest and slipping into her homeroom classroom as the bell rang.

He hounded all of his friends for their opinions, and though all of them gave it a resounding yes, he didn’t fully relax until the school guidance counselor read it and gave him a nod of approval.

The next day, his applications were in the mail, the first in a long line of dominos that would lead to the next stage in his life- a fact he realized caused him more stress than writers’ block ever had.

“Mike, could you stop?” Will asked a few days later. They were laying on the floor of the living room in the Byers-Hopper house, and Will was on his stomach, doodling in the sketchbook El had given him for his birthday.

“Stop what?”

Will blew out an annoyed breath. “Stop thinking so hard. You’re so stressed, it’s making *me* stressed. And I don’t want to be stressed on Christmas break. Please, think about anything else.”

Mike frowned. “You don’t have anything to worry about, NYU practically begged *you* to come to *them*.”

Will flushed but didn’t deny the accusation. “And the schools you applied to will want you, too. Just stop stressing.”

Mike frowned and stared up at the ceiling. “What should we talk

about, then?”

“How about the fact that Max and Lucas are totally going to get back together? Have you joined the betting pool?”

Mike sat up so fast he saw stars. “Wait, *what?*”

Will let out a laugh, looking up from his page to take in the expression on his friend’s face. “Yeah- even Steve, Jonathan, and Nancy are in.” Their respective siblings had returned a week earlier, and the now-annual battles for car keys had begun.

“I thought they had agreed to just be friends.” Mike’s eyebrows were pulled together, making Will chuckle again.

“You are, like, the anti-Sherlock, dude. Anyone with eyes can see they still like each other.”

“But...” He was silent as he processed the information. Then, “Okay, show me the betting table.”

He ended up putting down \$5 for March to April.

—

“Max, get off the cart before you tip it over and break everything.” Steve said without turning around. Max sighed and hopped off the cart, stomping her feet to sound her displeasure.

“This is taking forever,” She complained, pushing the cart forward so she could walk next to her brother. “And we’re not even buying fun stuff.”

“Max, for the last time, Pop-Tarts are not the fun stuff.” She cocked an unimpressed eyebrow. “Okay, fine, they are, but they aren’t on our list. I don’t want Joyce to see them and give me that sad, pitying look again.”

Max pouted. “It’s the season of giving, Steve.”

In response, Steve hip-checked her to the side and took control of the cart. “Right now, it’s the season of following the grocery list.”

After that first Christmas party in 1984, the group had formed a sort of unspoken agreement that every Christmas Eve, they would get together at someone's house, eat good food, and blow off steam. Since the kids had started high school, they'd gotten busier and busier, sometimes going days without really being able to spend time together. The Christmas party, however, was non-negotiable. This year (Max's senior year), Steve and Max had offered to host. Joyce was thrilled, El was already packing her sleeping bag, and Max had spent the last week begging Steve to let the boys sleep over, too.

"We'd all be in the same room, Steve." She wheedled pleadingly in the checkout line.

"You really want Lucas there?" When she and Lucas had broken up, Steve had been at the ready with tissues, movies, and chocolate, but Max insisted she was fine. She liked to joke that Steve was more upset about it than she was, but he knew that she was also upset it hadn't worked out. Lucas was just so much smarter than her, and had so much going for him. She would have dragged him down during the most important year of high school. Max would never admit it, but she still selfishly missed him.

Steve caught her arm as she was trying to sneak a pack of gum into the cart. "Of course. We're still good friends." She shot him a wry smile. "You sure you want Nancy there?"

"Low blow, Mayfield. Low blow. Should I ask Joyce to talk to you about colleges while we're at it?"

A loud groan escaped Max. "Dear god, no. The school counselor is bad enough. I'm not ready to decide what I want to do for the rest of my life."

Steve laughed and reached over to ruffle her hair, still long and curly. "None of us do, kid."

Says the guy about to enter the police academy, she thought wryly. Steve had worked long hours at the station in addition to community college classes, and Max knew she hadn't always been the easiest

person to live with, but he'd rarely ever complained. He reminded her, on multiple occasions, that he was as grateful to have her as she was to have him, a fact that still managed to astound her every day.

She changed the subject to what she thought of the latest episode of Full House, and her brother blissfully dropped both the Lucas and college arguments.

That night, she was struck with a sudden feeling of melancholy. She was stretched out on the couch, feet tucked under Steve's legs as she flipped through a book El had loaned her. Steve was switching between watching football and paying the bills. The entire house smelled like chocolate from the cookies they'd made that afternoon. She was as relaxed as ever, until she remembered that all of this—their life, these evenings, and even her friends—was temporary. She'd be leaving Hawkins in a few short months to take on her next adventure, and Steve was going into the police academy not long after she left. Everything about her life that had been a constant for the past four years was going to change, and she wanted to press pause, to stay in her little bubble until she was brave enough to take on the world on her own.

As if sensing her distress, Steve looked over at her, and tilted his head. "You think those cookies are ready to be decorated?" He asked, nodding towards the rack of chocolate sugar cookies that had been cooling for the past two hours.

Max nodded, closing her book as Steve brought the cookies, frosting, and sprinkles over to the coffee table. She slid to the floor and reached for a snowman shaped one, trying to decide how to start.

Steve, despite being a skilled cook and decent baker, was atrocious at decorating. While Max carefully outlined the snowmen with her frosting, Steve's cookies looked more like a toddler with directional insanity had been given a bag of frosting and free reign over the star cookies. She giggled when he drew a wobbly smiley face on a tree. They talked and ate the failure cookies, and Max relaxed. She looked at the wall by her bedroom, the trophies displayed on the shelf Steve had installed when she had won her first track award. There were pictures of the two of them on the wall, taken over the years (mostly by Jonathan). Max jumping on Steve's back, Steve creeping up on

Max with a snowball in hand, the two of them posing with hard hats and hammers when they'd decided to build a garage, and the two of them in the kitchen, making goofy faces at each other while cooking. The gang appeared in photographs here and there, too. Evidence of some of the best years of her life.

Steve was talking, but she didn't hear him until she heard the words high school. "What?" She asked, blinking in confusion.

Steve flashed her a smirk, like he knew she hadn't been paying attention. "I said, I'm glad you all are looking at college. You don't want to peak in high school, trust me."

"Are you trying to tell me that you peaked in high school?" Max furrowed her brow. "Because I don't think you did."

"Exactly," He leaned forward to emphasize his next words. "I was comfortable where I was in high school, mostly. But you nerds helped me realize that I didn't want to just be the King Steve everyone thought I was." He poked her in the shoulder teasingly. "The world is much bigger than what Hawkins and my family made me think. I didn't peak in high school because I kept wanting- and I continue to want- to be better. People like Tommy, or Billy?" Max didn't even flinch at the mention of her former stepbrother. "They peaked in high school. But people like you, or Dustin, or any of your friends, are going places. It's going to keep getting better for you."

Max raised her eyebrows, momentarily at a loss for words. Steve wasn't much for motivational speeches- much less emotionally complex motivational speeches. He preferred to let his actions do the talking when it came to those topics. "What brought this on?" She asked, trying for a joking tone.

"You've been quiet all evening. The queen of conversation, not talking?" He shrugged. "I put two and two together."

Max narrowed her eyes playfully at her brother. "Sometimes you're too insightful, you know that?"

"I do." He took a bite of his cookie, looking at her expectantly.

She knew he expected her to spill. *What the hell.* So, she spilled. Her fears, the uncertainty of the future, how much she would miss her life the way it was now. And, eventually, how much she missed Lucas.

Max didn't realize she'd started crying until Steve scooted around the table to wrap her up in a hug, rubbing her back comfortingly. "He's right there, and he doesn't know, and I can't tell him." She sobbed, trying not to snort all over Steve's sweater. She hadn't cried in front of him in years, and not since they moved. But here she was, blubbering like... well, like a teenager experiencing heartbreak.

"It's okay, kid. I'm here for you." Steve quietly comforted her until her sobs had quieted into hiccups. "Now, will you finally tell me the real reason you two broke up?" He asked, peeling her hair away from where it had gotten stuck to her face.

Max hesitated, knowing Steve hated when she would get down on herself. But she also didn't have the energy to lie. "Lucas is just... He's so smart, but he's also so caring. I couldn't let him get so absorbed with me, or our relationship, that he forgot to take other chances. Like, I want him to be able to find better, smarter girls that deserve him more... or maybe girls that he deserves? I don't know, I just know that he's too good for me. I didn't want to hold him back."

Steve listened to her calmly, nodding along until she came to the end of her speech. "I'm really glad you finally told me, kid." Max offered him a small smile. "But you know that is complete and utter bullshit, right?"

She gaped at him. "What?"

Steve threw his head back, exhaling. "Max, you must be able to see the way that guy still looks at you. It's been almost a year, and he's still head over heels. It's ridiculous."

Max started shaking her head, making to get up. "No, you're just saying this to make me feel better--"

"I'm really not," Steve countered, pulling her back down to the floor. "You two should give it another go. I'm with you 110%."

“Yeah?” For once, she didn’t push down on the hope rising in her chest at a second chance.

“Yeah. And as for all of this?” He gestured around their tiny home. “That’s not changing. I’m not changing. We’re family. Always.” He pulled her into another hug, which turned into giving her another noogie, and Max laughed, not even complaining about how he messed up her ponytail.

The Christmas Party was off to a successful start, Steve had to admit. He and Max had spent the entire morning in the kitchen while festive tunes played in the background- all Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald. At some point, Max had stuck a Santa hat on his head, and he had yet to take it off.

Joyce was full of compliments for the chefs, while the kids were trying to figure out whose Secret Santa was who.

Steve sat with Nancy and Jonathan, catching up with his friends, trying not to notice how the tiny rock on Nancy’s finger glinted in the reflection of the Christmas lights strung up on the walls. He wasn’t jealous of them, not really. Nancy had been his high school girlfriend, his first love, but not his entire world. In fact, when Jonathan first told him when he was planning to ask, Steve had happily come along ring shopping with him.

He realized he was jealous of what they had. He’d been on a few dates over the years, but never felt the way that he wanted to. Never felt like they were the people he wanted to bring home, or to sing about from the rooftops.

This family had always been enough for him. He never had time to lament being single, he was too busy living the kind of life he’d never expected.

It was all going to change, too. Everything was about to shake up, and he had no idea where they would land. But he wasn’t afraid.

Nancy leaned her head on his shoulder, a familiar weight at this

point. “You know, I have to think that this is all because of you.”

“I think it’s because Max and I offered to host.” His friend was silent. “Not what you mean?”

“Nancy’s no fun.” Jonathan supplied, taking a sip of eggnog.

Steve nodded at his friend in agreement. “I think this is all really because of a girl in the rain and a boy who was brave enough to take her in.”

Nancy hummed in assent. “That’s what started it. But you kept them together. All of this,” She gestured to the living room, before pausing and smiling wryly. “And *that*,” she pointed to Max and Lucas in the corner, dancing together, all smiles. “You helped make happen.”

Steve flushed with embarrassment and pride. “Stop it, you’re inflating my ego.”

“Oh, like it wasn’t already big enough to begin with?”

“I will not deal with this disrespect in my own house, Byers.”

The three bickered amicably until a blur of green flew past him, and his head was suddenly cold. He looked up to see Max settling the red hat on top of her own head. “Hey! I liked that hat!”

“I could see that. But now it’s mine.” She stuck her tongue out at him before whirling away.

“Oh, not so fast little red!” He called scrambling off the couch to wrestle back the hat, his sister’s peals of laughter ringing throughout the night.

Notes for the Chapter:

And we out! As always, thank you all so much for your kudos, support and kind comments- they're what keep me going! I love y'all so much, and I can't say thank you enough for reading what (I swear) was supposed to be a one shot.

Hugs, and I'll see y'all sometime soon!